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## The Oswald Review of Undergraduate Research and Criticism In the Discipline of English: Volume 21 Fall 2019

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# THE *Oswald Review*

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# THE *Oswald Review*

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## Illegitimacy and the Power of the Mother in the *Lais* of Marie de France

Claudia McCarron

Critical scholarship on the *lais* of Marie de France has tended to focus on Marie's portrayal of romantic and courtly love—an understandable preoccupation, given that each of her twelve poems concerns the trials and tribulations of a heterosexual couple. Glyn S. Burgess encapsulates this view when he writes that "[t]he theme of love is certainly the fundamental preoccupation of the *Lais*" (ix). Less attention, however, has been given to the children born as a result of these affairs, their function within Marie's medieval worldview, and the challenges they present for their parents, even though three of the *lais*, "Milun," "Yonec," and "Le Fresne," prominently feature illegitimate children. Given that illegitimacy and its discriminatory social repercussions occupy a significant space in the modern imagination, from the plays of Shakespeare to HBO's hit television series *Game of Thrones*, it is surprising to learn that the attitudes towards extramarital sex and bastardy expressed in these *lais* and medieval culture in general were much more complex than is often assumed.

Popular belief that the life of bastards in medieval Europe was rife with religious persecution stems from the sense that their parents had committed a sinful act and that the children were thus morally suspect. Since this belief has been prevalent since early modern times, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that such discrimination grew from "early medieval

Christian doctrine” (McDougall 1). However, a closer look into the complicated dynastic politics of medieval Europe paints a strikingly different picture. Historians have pointed out that “[b]efore the late eleventh century, it must have been very difficult to say whether a man was a bastard or not” since “monogamy was not well established” and “formal marriage was widely considered to be unnecessary” (Given-Wilson and Curteis 42). Since ideas about legitimate marriage were not firmly established, neither were ideas about what marked a child as legitimate or illegitimate. Sarah McDougall builds on these findings in *Royal Bastards*, her study of the development of bastardy in the ninth through thirteenth centuries. McDougall convincingly argues that “lineage,” not a religiously sanctioned marriage, “played the fundamental role” in determining whether a child had the familial and political connections necessary to inherit (5). In a time when many noblemen married and divorced with abandon, the ancestry of the mother was of crucial importance. If she came from a powerful, well-connected family, she would be able to pass on these advantageous ties to her child, ensuring political power not only to the child, but also to whatever vassalage he or she might inherit. Whether the mother had an advantageous lineage was often a crucial factor in whether her child was considered a legitimate heir or not, as “lineage mattered far more than legality” (14). McDougall uses this view, gleaned from a careful study of medieval law and court cases, to re-evaluate the history of bastardy, revealing its deeply political and gendered nature.

It is undeniable that bastardy holds a noteworthy place in Marie’s *lais*, and a close reading of “Milun,” “Yonec,” and “Le Fresne” demonstrates

her artistic use of the contemporary perceptions McDougall describes. The trajectory of the *lais* concerns the reinstating of illegitimate children as true heirs and members of legitimate families—a development that hinges, in all cases, on maternal lineage and involvement. When read together, these three *lais* present a pragmatic politics of bastardy that characterizes Marie’s medieval worldview and provides a method for the maternal legitimation, valuation, and enfranchisement of bastard children. Such a pattern reveals the power available to women within the boundaries of a patriarchal society and how Marie manipulates these boundaries to provide her female characters with agency in love, motherhood, and societal positions.

While the Harley 978 manuscript, on which most modern translations of the *lais* base their arrangement, places “Le Fresne” first, followed by “Yonec” and “Milun,” it is most helpful for my purposes to reverse this order. Such a reversal does not present significant issues, as there is no historical or critical consensus regarding the composition dates of the *lais* (Burgess 2-3), and the Harley manuscript, in all likelihood, does not reflect Marie’s own arrangement. Reading “Milun” as the first of the *lais* concerned with bastardy followed by “Yonec” and “Le Fresne” shows a clearer development of Marie’s use of illegitimacy as a means for maternal empowerment.

“Milun” establishes the figure of the mother in a secondary but crucial role that emphasizes her ability to legitimize her child through her aristocratic connections. Marie begins the poem by claiming that she will present “a variety of beginnings” (“Milun” line 2), an appropriate disclaimer for a narrative preoccupied with the effects of an extramarital birth on both the child and his parents. Milun, the father, is “a good knight” who is famed

for his skill at jousting (11-13). This prowess catches the attention of the unnamed daughter of a baron who takes him as her lover (28). While the fact that the girl is never given a name can be read as a form of objectification, it also emphasizes her position as the daughter of a powerful family, establishing her social superiority in relation to Milun. As the daughter of a nobleman, she comes from a landed family who do not have to depend on knightly competitions or “martial exploits” (124) to win honor and financial stability as her lover must. The girl occupies, by value of her birth, a position above Milun’s, which allows her a measure of control over him.

This control manifests itself once she becomes pregnant. Recognizing that the discovery of her condition will result in the loss “of her honor and her good name” (“Milun” 58), she meets with Milun to discuss the problem. He defers to her authority, saying he will “do / whatever she counsel[s]” (65-66), a choice that at first seems unusual. Milun’s maleness should privilege him over his lover, giving him the responsibility for deciding the future of their child. His deference to his lover reveals that, as powerful as the medieval patriarchy was, it was also flexible enough to allow exceptions where questions of class and status were concerned. Milun’s lover is a striking literary example of this flexibility, as her superior social standing provides her with the power to decide her child’s future. Such power would not be available to her if she were married to a man of the same or greater social standing than herself (later in the *lai*, her freedom will be severely curtailed by marriage to a social equal). While extramarital love and pregnancy do present significant problems for the girl, they also allow her an agency when resolving those problems—agency that would not be available to her



in a lawful marriage. This irony sets the tone for the maternally focused politics of bastardy that continues to be developed throughout the three *lais*.

In deciding her son's future, Milun's lover takes care to preserve his maternal aristocratic lineage. Once he is born, she tasks Milun with transporting him to her sister, "a rich woman, worthy and prudent" ("Milun" 70). Having her son raised within her family ensures that he will have access to the benefits conferred on him by his mother's social status. While the letter that accompanies the infant does disclose the identity of his father (79), Marie allocates more lines to the girl's instructions to her sister: "this child belongs to [your] sister, / ... make sure that he's well nourished" (73-75). These lines lay out the girl's expectation that her son will not simply be given a place to stay; he will also be cared for in a way that acknowledges his maternal lineage. The letter demonstrates how, in medieval literature and society, "lineage mattered" far more than the marital status of the parents (McDougall 165). While Milun and the girl's child is read as illegitimate by modern readers, the *lai* itself makes clear that his mother's position guarantees that the boy is "cherished" ("Milun" 120) by his aunt, who treats him as a legitimate child, ensuring that he is "dubbed a knight" (292) and given all of the privileges that his mother's status bequeaths to him.

While the boy is treated as if he were legitimate son and heir throughout his childhood, in adulthood he serves as the device to legitimize the union of his parents, chiefly through the ancestral benefits passed on to him by his mother. The girl herself becomes a much more passive figure after she is forcibly wedded to "a rich lord of the region" ("Milun" 127), although she and Milun still carry on their affair. Her work to establish her

son's social standing earlier in the *lai*, however, ensures that he possesses the position and resources that will enable him to find his father. Chief of these resources is the ring that Milun gave his lover, which she decides to bequeath to their child (77). The ring, which serves as a physical proof of Milun's fatherhood, complements the girl's gift of ancestry by becoming a representation of Milun's gallantry and knightly prowess. While Milun's recognition of the ring is what eventually unites him and his son (435-37), the young man's childhood as a privileged member of the aristocracy and the uncertainty surrounding his conception—all ensured and engineered by his mother—are what enable him to develop into a more proficient knight than Milun. Discovery of his father's identity, for instance, prompts him to determine to "seek out even greater renown" than his (311). Although this development at first seems to value Milun over the mother, it was she who decided when and how Milun's identity would be revealed to the boy (81-86). Her decisions are what eventually bring the two together when Milun challenges the young man to a joust in order to restore his reputation as an unmatched knight. After he is unhorsed, Milun recognizes the boy's ring and the two have a joyful meeting (477-78). The son determines to unite his parents, even though it means killing his mother's husband (500-501). His plans to clear the path for the legitimation of their marriage prove unnecessary, however, as they learn that the husband has conveniently died (518). Marie is clear that it is still the son who "brought them together, / gave his mother to his father" (529-30). He is able to do this not only because he is a flesh and blood symbol of their love, but also because his maleness and the position his mother gave him as a member of the nobility allow him to

inherit and supersede her authority, enabling him to sanction her marriage to a man of lesser social standing. This move both proves the power of his maternal lineage and legitimizes him.

In “Yonec,” the second of the *lais* dealing with illegitimacy that I will discuss, the role of the mother in legitimizing and liberating her child expands and develops the pattern of power through maternal lineage by focusing on moral rather than social superiority. Despite the *lai*’s title, Yonec’s mother is the focus of most of the poem’s 554 lines. Like Milun’s lover, she comes “from a good family” (“Yonec” 22) and is unwillingly married to a “rich man” (12). Her husband proves to be not only unattractive, but also jealous, and in order to prevent her from taking a younger lover, he keeps her “locked ... inside his tower” (27). The girl may not be her husband’s social superior, but she clearly far outstrips him as far as morality is concerned. Bemoaning her isolation and loneliness, she exclaims that “My fate is very harsh. / ... What is this jealous old man afraid of?” (68, 71). She notes that he has prevented her from attending church (75), a notable stricture in medieval Europe’s highly Christianized culture. Even more damning, the girl knows that his suspicions are unfounded, and if he were to set her free, she promises that she would be “very gracious to my lord / even if I didn’t want to be” (79-80). In her final condemnation of him, the girl claims that her husband was “baptized / ... in the river of hell” (88-89). The man’s cruelty and selfishness have marked him as unworthy of his more virtuous and dutiful wife, negating his rights as a husband. This negation is demonstrated by the fact that God Himself sanctions the girl’s extramarital affair. Immediately after she prays for a lover (103-104), a hawk flies

in through the tower window and transforms into “a handsome and noble knight” (115). The girl’s moral superiority takes the place of the social superiority of Milun’s lover, enabling her in a similar manner to make decisions regarding her relationships and sexuality.

The girl’s moral purity not only becomes a crucial part of the lineage that she passes on to her son, but it also allows her to conflate and assume the roles of both father and mother. Her morality is further proven by her loyalty to her fairy lover, Muldumarec. Both he and she treat their relationship as a legitimate marriage rather than a shameful affair. In fact, they even undergo a marriage ceremony of sorts. After declaring that she will only “take him as her lover / if he believe[s] in God” (“Yonec” 138-39), she arranges for him to take the Eucharist (187-88). This ceremony involves the couple lying together side by side while a chaplain administers the sacrament. Both the religious ritual and the sexual intimacy foreshadowed by their physical closeness parallel a Christian marriage ceremony. Their relationship after this ceremony likewise suggests a renewing, pure love rather than sinful passion, as they share a mental as well as physical intimacy that proves redemptive for the girl. By finding companionship, her life once again “become[s] precious to her” (215), and she longs for “her love all the time” (219). For his part, Muldumarec is courteous and attentive, promising to visit her “whenever” she “please[s]” (199). By undercutting the authority of the girl’s legal husband, Marie creates a space for her heroine that allows her to determine her own fate. The fact that she chooses a God-fearing, kind-hearted man to share her life with and that she binds herself to him through a Christian ceremony vindicates her to a medieval audience and

further cements her morality, which ensures that her child, when he is born, will be as deserving as any child born to a legally married couple. Her loyalty to Muldumarec also prepares her for the process of taking on his role, and passing on a paternal as well as a maternal legacy to their child.

The girl is forced to take on the paternal role due to the brutal murder of Muldumarec. In a final proof of his reprobation, her husband's jealousy over her newfound happiness prompts him to investigate and discover her affair. Rather than confronting her with the knowledge, he instead devises a brutal trap to kill her lover, mounting "great spikes of iron" ("Yonec" 286) on the outside of the tower window. When the girl innocently calls Muldumarec to her, he is wounded by the spikes. Freeing himself and flying through the window, he "alight[s] on the bed . . . / staining the bedclothes with blood" (315-16). This juxtaposition of imagery related to both birth and death is supported by Muldumarec's announcement that not only is he mortally wounded, but his lover is also "pregnant with his child" (320, 327). In addition, the girl assumes her new role as a paternal figure. When Muldumarec flies back to the fairy kingdom he rules over, she follows him, telling him that she "would rather die" than spend the rest of her life with her husband (411). However, he urges her to return, providing her with a ring that will make her husband treat her kindly, and giving her a sword she is to pass on to their son when he comes of age. He also gives her the responsibility of telling their son "the story of his death, / how he was wrongfully killed" (431-32). This responsibility to remember and tell his history makes the girl responsible for transferring both her and Muldumarec's lineage to Yonec. While the circumstances surrounding this conflation

tion are undeniably tragic, combining the maternal and paternal lineages makes her the ultimate authority regarding the future status of her child.

By passing on her lineage of moral purity to Yonec, the girl makes certain that he will be prepared to take on his father's royal legacy. She takes pains to raise him to be a pure and noble man, as the *lai* relates that "Her son was born and nourished, / protected and cherished" ("Yonec" 456-57). As a result, Yonec grows up to be a young man who is both "brave" and "strong" as well as "generous" and "munificent" (461-62). Her legal husband's part in imparting this legacy is hinted to be minimal. Despite the fact that he is now kind to his wife and no longer imprisons her, this change of heart is a sham, only brought about by the magical intervention of Muldumarec. Thus, the responsibility and credit for proving Yonec's lineage falls to his mother.

When Yonec comes of age, his mother introduces him to his father's legacy and in the process confirms his position as the ruler of the fairy kingdom and Muldumarec's avenger. Soon after Yonec is knighted, he and his mother travel with her husband to Caerlon ("Yonec" 467-68). His new knighthood is significant, as Burgess writes that in medieval culture the knighting ceremony would "have acted as a regenerative process in the boy's life, marking his readiness for a new beginning" (72). Yonec's new beginning takes place when his mother names him Muldumarec's heir, and he must take on the responsibilities inherent to that position. On the way to Caerlon, the group becomes lost and, quite conveniently, stumbles upon Muldumarec's tomb. Upon inquiry, they learn that the people of the land "have waited many days, / . . . for the son" of Muldumarec and his lover

("Yonec" 522, 524). Yonec's mother takes the opportunity to tell him about Muldumarec and how he was killed, revealing his true lineage and duties to him. Giving him Muldumarec's sword, she collapses on her lover's tomb and dies (539). When Yonec realizes that she is dead, he kills her husband and "with his father's sword / he avenged his mother's sorrow" (543-44). He is then proclaimed the "lord" of the land (550), a position his mother prepared him for morally and socially. "Yonec" complicates the customs of illegitimacy and maternal lineage found in "Milun" by conflating moral and social superiority, and by placing all of the power of legitimation under the control of the mother. Although this power does come at great psychological and physical cost, it further empowers the figure of the mother and her illegitimate child, building on the social patterns governing illegitimacy in a way that is quite daring.

Marie's manipulation of the politics of illegitimacy to empower the women of her *lais* reaches its height in "Le Fresne." A deeply moving story of the rags-to-riches ascent of an abandoned child, the poem also demonstrates the flexibility of bastardy as a social distinction and its possible effects on a child's upbringing and prospects. The titular main character is born to legally married parents but, due to the ignorance and carelessness of her mother, is designated as illegitimate and abandoned immediately after birth. Fresne's mother is married to a "brave and worthy" man ("Le Fresne" 6) whose best friend's wife becomes pregnant before she does. The other woman gives birth to twin boys, and her delighted husband promises to send one to his friend to foster (17). Presumably jealous of the other woman's good fortune, Fresne's mother spitefully proclaims, "Both he and

she are disgraced by this,” announcing that a twin birth is impossible unless the woman has had “two men . . . with her” (36, 42). Her proclamation has devastating consequences. The other woman is imprisoned by her husband, while Fresne’s mother becomes the object of hatred for “[e]very woman” in the region (55). Moreover, when she becomes pregnant shortly afterwards, she herself delivers twin girls (70). Recognizing her mistake, she declares that she “condemned myself / when I slandered all womankind” (79-80). However, she nevertheless decides to hide her shame instead of admitting to her slander by abandoning one of the girls. Fresne’s origin story demonstrates the fluidity of illegitimacy and how, in pre-modern times, a mother was the only one who could vouch for the legitimacy of her child. By abandoning Fresne, her mother marks her as illegitimate, despite her lawful birth.

Robbed of a strong mother figure, Fresne must struggle throughout the *lai* to prove her status as a legitimate daughter on her own. Although this would at first seem quite different from the cases of Milun’s son and Yonec, a closer reading demonstrates how it builds on the same principles of maternal caring and lineage to constitute Marie’s most radical transformation of the politics of illegitimacy. As Michelle Freeman has pointed out, Fresne is protected and raised by “a community of sisters” (16). From the servant girl who leaves her at a convent (“Le Fresne” 171-72), to the peasant woman who nurses her (206), to the abbess who “raise[s] the child herself” (227), Fresne is surrounded by a network of women who look after and cherish her after her biological mother abandons her. She grows into “a beautiful” and “refined” young woman (237-38), who, as later events will



demonstrate, has inherited her foster mothers' legacy of love and sacrifice. The maternal lineage that proved so crucial in the last two *lais* is undeniably present in "Le Fresne" but in a revolutionary new form. Instead of one mother, she has many, and instead of a social position, they endow her with a moral one. While this reliance on moral superiority was developed at length in "Yonec," "Le Fresne" takes it a step further. Yonec's mother was able to pass on her lover's prominent social position to her son along with her morality, and it is this conflation that marked Yonec as a legitimate son and heir. In contrast, Fresne's mothers are only able to offer her their moral attributes, which, when unmoored from an influential social position, have little currency in a feudal society. As Sharon Kinoshita points out, "without an identifiable lineage, she is nothing more than a foundling with no value" (36). By choosing to characterize her heroine in this manner, Marie poses an issue that the rest of the *lai* investigates, asking whether the morality bequeathed to Fresne by her surrogate mothers will be enough to override her lack of social status and to overcome the stigma of her illegitimacy.

Fresne must leave the convent, and the security her abbess foster mother provides, when she is still quite young, forcing her to enact the sacrifice, kindness, and pragmatism that her mother figures would otherwise have provided. A young lord named Gurun falls in love with her beauty and by "plead[ing]" and "promis[ing] so much" ("Le Fresne" 273) convinces her to become his lover. Gurun is then unwilling to allow Fresne to remain in the relative safety of the convent, telling her that the abbess will surely be "upset" if Fresne falls "pregnant right under her roof" (282-83). He convinces her to "come away" with him to his castle (286), promising never

to abandon her. By leaving the convent, Fresne enters into the “startlingly cynical” world of “the sexual politics of the feudal aristocracy” (Kinoshita 34). In the eyes of Gurun’s vassals, her kind heart is of no consequence, and neither is the fact that they “love her for her noble character” (“Le Fresne” 311). She is an impediment to the social order they are accustomed to and draws Gurun’s interest away from “having a child born in wedlock” (324) and bequeathing his property to that child. The political difficulty Fresne’s status poses is illustrated by the brutal metaphor Gurun’s vassals use to describe her. She is an “ash” that “bears no fruit” which Gurun must discard for another tree that “bears nuts and thus gives pleasure” (339-40). Fresne is a bare tree Gurun has no use for, as she has no political ties or powerful lineage to pass on, and any children she bears him will be unfit to inherit his land and position. As a result, his vassals insist that he abandon her for a fruitful, noble wife who will give birth to legitimate heirs. Caught in this hostile environment, Fresne must depend on herself, and must protect her interests in a sacrificial manner that has been characterized in the earlier *lais* as maternal. Despite the fact that she is “hidden away” from Gurun’s new bride, she “continue[s] to serve her lord well” (349, 353) and even shows kindness and care to his fiancée (380). Fresne’s decision to live humbly and uncomplainingly in the house of her former lover and his future wife not only demonstrates her practicality (after all, she has nowhere else to flee to); it also shows the kindness and self-sacrifice that has been coded in the other two *lais* as maternal, so much so that Gurun’s future mother-in-law comes to “love and admire” Fresne (384). In this manner, Fresne assumes the motherly role filled not only by her many foster mothers, but also by

Milun's lover and Yonec's mother.

Painful as Fresne's experiences may be, they prepare her to prove her position and claim her inheritance as a legitimate child. This development allows Fresne to bequeath her maternal moral lineage to herself and prove her own identity as a legitimate child worthy of an inheritance. In a twist of fate, Gurun's bride-to-be is Fresne's own twin sister, and his mother-in-law is the woman whose jealous declaration marked Fresne as a bastard and who abandoned her at birth. The key players are all in place for a triumphant reunion and reconciliation, but in this case it is Fresne who proves her position as a legitimate child, not her mother, and this proof is only made possible through the self-sacrifice inherited from her foster mothers. The night before the wedding, Fresne sets about arranging the couple's bridal chamber and is disappointed with the quality of the cover laid out on the bed. She instead decides to replace it with "her birth garment" ("Le Fresne" 403), the rich "embroidered silk robe" (123) she was found in as an infant. When Gurun's mother-in-law sees the robe, she immediately recognizes it as the robe "she'd given / to her infant daughter when she abandoned her" (415-16). When questioned, Fresne is able to produce the ring that was also left with her, causing the penitent woman to declare "My dear, you are my daughter!" (450). Fresne's sacrifice of her robe reveals her true nature as a legitimate child by prompting her mother's confession and opens the way for her legal marriage to Gurun, which closes the *lai*. The fairy-tale quality of this ending masks the revolutionary claim Marie makes through Fresne. By stripping her of the support and love of a high-born mother that was crucial in the last two *lais*, she forces her protagonist to find the resources

for nurturance and goodness within herself and ends with an implicit declaration that these characteristics are enough to mark her as being nobly born and worthy of an advantageous marriage. Such a reading discounts the social hierarchy that mattered so deeply in “Milun” and “Yonec,” suggesting that the true marker of legitimacy lies in the children themselves, not in their biological circumstances. However, it still locates this power firmly within the mother figure, as Fresne’s maternal lineage and motherly caring for her sister are what cause her to be recognized.

When read together, “Milun,” “Yonec,” and “Le Fresne” reveal Marie’s transformation of medieval ideas about legitimacy and lineage into a network of motherly authority and power, which reaches the height of its development and progression in “Le Fresne.” At first, the overwhelming focus on power through marriage and motherhood may seem somewhat conventional. After all, Marie is locating female power precisely in the maternal roles that are most commonly used to oppress women, and one of her three heroines dies as a result of assuming that authority. However, the fact that Marie portrays female power as existing within, rather than outside of, societally accepted roles, provides a realistic depiction of the autonomy available to highborn medieval women, while still allowing her heroines to manipulate and question the validity of those same roles. This acknowledgment of existing social structures presents a clear picture of the complex dynamics of the medieval patriarchy, while still paving the way for a more recognizable feminist literary tradition that would not emerge until centuries later.

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Reflecting Identity through Glass Windows in Charles Dickens's *Tom Tiddler's Ground*

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In Charles Dickens's Christmas portmanteau story *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, Mr. Broadhead, a travelling artist, claims that "the windows of a house give one a great idea of the dispositions, the habits, and the tempers of the occupants" (Collins 25). Windows appear in many different shapes and varieties throughout *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, disclosing a concept of identity that is not definitive, but fragile and malleable. The framework for this portmanteau story—a nameless Traveller visits a nameless county to seek out a hermit named Mr. Mopes—was created by Dickens and based partly on an autobiographical experience. Mr. Traveller attempts to convince Mr. Mopes to abandon his dreaded, solitary existence, and does so by inviting fellow passersby to share their stories of life from the outside world.

Several regular contributors to Dickens's periodicals wrote chapters for *Tom Tiddler's Ground*: Charles Alston Collins writes Mr. Broadhead's story of how he once observed a married couple's unfortunate circumstance through a glass window in his London apartment; Amelia B. Edwards tells the tale of Francois Thierry, a passionate Frenchman who escapes prison after committing political offenses; Dickens's close ally Wilkie Collins writes the story of two unrelated baby boys born on a ship at sea who are accidentally mixed up and remain indistinguishable due to a coincidental close resemblance; and the relatively unknown John Harwood provides

the unique narrative of a business man's trek across continental America to retrieve his employer's pocketbook.

From the first page of the first story, characters interact with glass windows in noteworthy ways: they glance outward through windows, fixated on distant landscapes from an interior dwelling; they glance through windows, observing the lifestyles of a home's inhabitants from the outside; they climb in and out of windows, cover their windows with blinders, and smash the glass out of their window frames to replace them with bars. What does Dickens's, and his fellow authors', literary fixation on glass windows reveal to us about *Tom Tiddler's Ground*?

Windows function in *Tom Tiddler's Ground* both to reveal and to distort identity, suggesting that our sense of identity is not definitive nor visibly perceptible, but is malleable and easily mistaken. Utilizing windows as a literary motif, the authors draw a distinct dichotomy between individual identity, or one's personality and unique attributes, and social identity, or one's socioeconomic place in society, simultaneously implying that individuality is of little worth and that, despite its superficiality, it is only one's social identity that is necessary to flourish in modern society.

Glass windows appear frequently in Dickens's works, from the beginning of his career with *Pickwick Papers*, to Dickens's final, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Katherine Williams, perhaps the leading expert on Dickens's literary use of windows, argues that "Dickens was viscerally attracted to windows, and viscerally repulsed by their absence" (58). Dickens seemed to have a personal connection with windows that transcended his fiction. In the biography written by close confidante John

Forster, Dickens relates that during his darkest time working in a blacking house as a child, he was stationed by a window where “people,” including his father, “used to stop and look in” (67). Kristin Leonard argues that this sense of “display case captivity” produced by a glass window clearly penetrates his novels, particularly in the case of Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (208). Concerning this incident, Michael Hollington writes that, “when one recalls that Dickens as a child was taken away from Warren’s Blacking Warehouse because his father was embarrassed by the fact that his son was visible as an ‘exhibit’ at work through the window . . . it is not difficult to understand why so many meanings gathered for Dickens around glass thresholds between inside and outside” (11). Dickens’s writings in his own periodicals also reveal his fixation with windows. He “attacked” the infamous Window Tax in an article in *Household Words*, and later, after visiting a factory that made windows, published “Plate Glass,” an article detailing the techniques of glassmaking (Williams 56, Armstrong 20). Dickens often lamented the difficulty of organizing and editing his annual Christmas portmanteau stories into cohesive works with unifying themes and morals. It is clear, however, that the literary motif of glass windows appears so frequently in *Tom Tiddler’s Ground* and holds such significance to the development of plots and characters in the stories that it can hardly be considered coincidence.

The ways in which characters interact with glass windows suggest that identity can be changed in an instant. In Edwards’ chapter “Picking Up Terrible Company,” a Frenchman named Francois Thierry shares his story of escaping from a French prison with Mr. Traveller and the hermit, Mr. Mopes. Thierry recounts that, upon arrival, he is given his prison uni-



form, and on the trousers and blouse “were printed the fatal letters ‘T.F.’” (Edwards 66). Thierry is then given a green cap, on the front of which is the number “207.” In an instant, Thierry’s name, the symbolic embodiment of his personal identity, is stripped and replaced by a prison number. “I was no longer Francois Thierry,” claims the Frenchman, “I was Number Two Hundred and Seven,” implying that identity is not dictated by any inherited or definite means, but that one’s entire identity can be shifted and determined by anyone at any time (66). After a short and miserable stay in the cruel prison and an escape attempt, Francois finds himself stuck inside a confined room, with a locked door and “a tiny window close against the ceiling” (76). Hollington argues that “to be stationed at the window in Dickens” stands for “a longing for change and progress and the signs thereof” (3). The “tiny”-ness of the window symbolizes the relatively “tiny” chance for the Frenchman’s desires for freedom to come to fruition. He spends his time not looking out the window, but instead crawling through it. The Frenchman describes in great detail the grueling process of climbing up to the elevated glass window, and how he “drew [himself] through the little casement, dropped as gently as [he] could upon the moist earth,” and made a safe escape, bringing about not only the “change” and “progress” he had hoped for, but also a change in identity (77).

The simple act of crawling out of a window results in Francois’s escape from prison, but also the termination of his identity as a prisoner, as quickly as it was given to him. He does not serve his time, nor does he show remorse or recompense for his political crimes. The transition through a window provides the Frenchman the means to escape confinement and

transforms his identity from a prisoner identified by a number to a free man identified by a name. It is important to note that Edwards draws a distinction between two different types of identity, as this theme continues throughout the other authors' contributions to *Tom Tiddler's Ground* as well. In addition to his individual identity, crawling through the window also alters the Frenchman's social identity, due to the change from captive criminal to free man. When he later introduces himself to Mr. Traveller and Mr. Mopes, he proudly declares, "I am a Frenchman by birth, and my name is Francois Thierry" (Edwards 65). Francois's physical interaction with a glass window transforms his identity, suggesting that both individual and social identities are not definitive but fragile, subject to change at any moment.

The second chapter in *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, by Charles Alston Collins, also uses windows to reinforce the idea that characters are defined by both an individual and a social identity, and suggests that identity is easily mistaken. The entire plot of this story, called "Picking Up Evening Shadows," revolves around windows. The character sharing the story with Mr. Traveller and the hermit Mr. Mopes is Mr. Broadhead, who begins by stating that "the windows of a house give one a great idea of the dispositions, the habits, and tempers of the occupants" (Collins 25). Mr. Broadhead, an artist, tells of a time when he lived alone in a studio in London and how he observed a married couple who lived directly across the way. During the day, Mr. Broadhead could examine the empty interior of the couple's residence through his window and theirs, but during the evening, when the window blinds were shut, Mr. Broadhead could analyze the actions and routines of the couple from the window of his own home by examining their

silhouettes. From observing the couple's window, Mr. Broadhead accurately perceived much about their identity. His "tendency to attach much importance to the external aspects of things as indicative of what goes on within" led him to surmise that the couple lived in poverty, but "little contrivances and adornments there were about this poor casement, which, though of the cheapest and most twopenny order of decorative art, showed yet some love of the gentler side of things, and a wish to put a good face on poverty" (Collins 25, 26). Again, like the Frenchman, this glass window reveals to the narrator and the reader both the individual and social identity of the couple. Their low social class is manifest, but fashionable decorative taste speaks to Mr. Broadhead of the individual identities of the couple that seemingly differ from their class status.

The "mistaken pair" is a literary trope that appears often in Dickens's fiction, and it is through the glass window that Mr. Broadhead confuses one married couple for another, again suggesting that identity is not always visibly perceptible, but can be easily mistaken. After observing through shadows that the husband was ill and could no longer provide financial support, Mr. Broadhead began anonymously donating money to aid the couple in their struggle, only to find later that he had mistaken the silhouetted couple in the window for another married couple living next door who were suffering from an identical misfortune and benefited from the anonymous donations. If two individuals or groups of individuals can appear to be so similar by appearance or circumstance as to have their identities completely mistaken by those who are familiar with them, the authors of *Tom Tiddler's Ground* here suggest that individual identity fails to perform

its sole duty of distinguishing individuals from one another. In the case of the couple, the window functions paradoxically by revealing accurately to Mr. Broadhead information about the couple's individual identity and social class, while simultaneously causing him to mistake the couple for their next-door neighbors. The window both reveals and distorts identity, implying that identity is fickle and easily mistaken.

The glass window functions in a similarly paradoxical manner as it reveals to the reader the identity of Mr. Broadhead himself, the narrator of the story. In his case, the function of glass windows seems to comply with Leonard's theory that windows create "physical and societal confinement"; however, the windows simultaneously provide Mr. Broadhead with an opportunity for sociality as he comes to know his neighbors by means of observation through a window (209). Mr. Broadhead repeatedly confesses that it was the loneliness and isolation he felt living by himself in London that fueled his obsession with the married couple in the window across the way. To the hermit, Mr. Broadhead warns, "I never knew any good to come yet. . . of a man shutting himself up the way you're doing" (Collins 22). The glass window confines Mr. Broadhead to a solitary lifestyle, and perhaps even temporarily intensifies his loneliness by giving him a glimpse of social domestic life but denying him the experience of being able to engage in such a life. Williams suggests that two of the literary functions of windows are "to frame an outside world that is seen and analyzed from an interior" and "to frame an interior space that is seen and analyzed from the outside," both of which occur in this story (59). This two-window separation creates the illusion that sociality is present, but only through the passive act of

observation that the windows provide. This is the “display case captivity” that Leonard refers to in her argument on *The Old Curiosity Shop*. As Mr. Broadhead himself admits, “it would be difficult to express how anxiously I longed for the evening, and the shadows which should tell me more” (Collins 28).

The window that confines and restricts reveals Mr. Broadhead’s identity as one who is completely alone in terms of friends or family, but later shows Mr. Broadhead’s transformed identity as one no longer defined by isolation. Mr. Broadhead eventually introduces himself to the shadow-couple and admits that he intended to donate financially to assist them after learning of their circumstances through his window, then returns home. Mr. Broadhead sat for an hour, “reflecting on the loneliness of my own position,” when he heard his name shouted from a window across the way, discovering that the couple of his obsession was inviting him to join them for the evening (Collins 61). Ultimately, Mr. Broadhead’s observations from his confined window space provides for a different identity, defined not by isolation but instead by sociality. Eventually, his interactions with glass windows did not perpetuate his identity as a man “leading a solitary life,” but instead the glass windows, which originally provided only confinement and restriction, allowed for a social life and a new identity as a man no longer living in complete isolation (22). Again, windows function paradoxically both to reveal and to distort identity, implying the malleability of one’s identity.

While identity proves to be fragile, malleable, and easily mistaken in *Tom Tiddler’s Ground*, the authors also suggest that different parts of

identity prove to be more significant than others. Dickens's own framework chapter distinguishes between individual identity and social identity by describing the village and its windows, proposing that individual identity is of little worth and that social status is the preferred method of identification in Victorian society. Dickens describes in detail the idyllic farmland "among the pleasant dales and trout-streams of a green English county," but then adds, "no matter what county" (3). Dickens neglects to provide a proper name that might separate the village from any other and give it a distinct sense of individual identity. According to one critic, the setting of *Tom Tiddler's Ground* is "framed by an image of a village that is less truly particular than nationally representative" (Piesse 49). Dickens almost lazily remarks that "the village street was like most other village streets: wide for its height, silent for its size, and drowsy in the dullest degree," further implying the idea that individuality is of little importance (3).

Dickens does, however, provide the village with a developed social identity, and he does so by describing the glass windows of certain buildings. The "largest of window-shutters" of the "Doctor's house. . . stood as conspicuous and different as the Doctor himself in his broadcloth, among the smockfrocks of his patients" (Dickens 4). Though the Doctor apparently merits some form of introduction, he never makes an appearance in the story—only his window does. Dickens isn't using the window to describe a person; he is using the window to describe an occupation of a character who isn't even present. Further down the street, "some of the small tradesmen's houses. . . had a Cyclops window in the middle of the gable . . . suggesting that some forlorn rural Prentice must wriggle himself into that apartment

horizontally” (5). Again, Dickens’s description of the tradespeople provides no individual detail of the humans occupying these professions—the reader only knows that their rank in the business is “Prentice.” Dickens’s description of a “Cyclops window” further intimates the anonymity of the village. The social identity of the village is the main focus, as opposed to any unique detail about the actual people living there that might provide the village with a distinct flavor. Dickens describes what appears to be a ghost town, where glass windows reveal information about occupations filled by mysteriously absent villagers. All of these details suggest that in the modernized Victorian society of *Tom Tiddler’s Ground*, one’s identity is shaped by titles, occupations, and class, not by any originality or individualism.

The intentional lack of proper names continues with several of the characters in the framework story, implying that one’s individual identity is less notable than status or title. The names given to characters in Dickens’s fiction are a curious phenomenon that have received much attention from scholars and critics. Some names are full of deeper implications for a character’s identity, while other names seem to play a purely comic function. The first three characters introduced in the first chapter of *Tom Tiddler’s Ground* are referred to only as the Landlord, the Tinker, and the Traveller, or Mr. Traveller, the protagonist. Dickens, who is known to put much effort into concocting clever names for even the most insignificant characters, surely has a purpose in neglecting to give his main character a proper name. The hermit, whose lowly and pitiful existence becomes the central feature around which the plot of the entire portmanteau story revolves, *is* given a name, and is referred to as Mr. Mopes. One could argue that having a given

name makes Mr. Mopes, despite his position as the piece's antagonist, superior to Mr. Traveller in terms of a developed individual identity. Without a proper name, Mr. Traveller lacks the depth of individuality that belongs to Mr. Mopes. Further, Mr. Mopes is described as having many other traits that accentuate his individuality, perhaps even more so than Mr. Traveller. The hermit Mr. Mopes speaks "with an air of authority" as one "who has been to school," has a distinctively fierce and rugged personality type, and he is referred to as a "genius," "an Emperor," and "a Conqueror" (Dickens 12, 8, 7, 7). Such personal distinction is given only to Mr. Mopes, and the author neglects to develop even slightly the individuality of Mr. Traveller. However, Dickens seems to be less interested in the difference in depth of individuality, as he puts a greater emphasis on the social identities of these two characters.

There is a clear disparity drawn between the socioeconomic circumstances of Mr. Traveller and Mr. Mopes, in which individuality plays no part. Though no occupation or social ranking is given to Mr. Traveller, it is apparent that he has a comfortable place in society, whereas Mr. Mopes is alienated and marginalized. Although Mr. Mopes has a more distinct individual identity, without a developed social identity he is nothing more than a "Nuisance" (Dickens 16). Mr. Traveller, politely but sternly, says to Mr. Mopes, "you are a Nuisance, and this kennel is a Nuisance . . . and the Nuisance is not merely a local Nuisance, because it is a general Nuisance to know that there *can be* such a Nuisance left in civilization so very long after its time" (16). Mr. Traveller admits that, in previous eras, hermits were romanticized for their eccentricity, cultivated by a life in isolation. However,



it is implied here that the age of “individual identity” has passed, and modern civilization values only those with a developed social identity. Unlike in the past, high status overshadows individual uniqueness.

Lastly, a critical examination of the windows belonging to both Landlord and Mr. Mopes further establishes the different social and individual identities of Landlord, who is identified purely by his socio-economic status, and Mr. Mopes, who is purely identified by his eccentric individuality, ultimately implying that a stable position in society far outweighs any sense of personal identity. Of all the features of Mr. Mopes’s residence, his windows are the first things described. As stated before, a visitor to Mr. Mopes’s residence said that windows “give one a great idea of the dispositions, the habits, and the tempers of the occupants,” both in preface to his own story but also perhaps as a subtle observation of Mr. Mopes himself, or what could be supposed of his nature from simply beholding his windows (Collins 25). In describing the windows, Dickens remarks that “all the window-glass. . . had been abolished by the surprising genius of Mopes” (Dickens 7, 8). Glass equips the window with much of its poetic capacity; without glass, a window is nothing but an empty frame. The glass is what both reveals and distorts, providing readers with insight into the complex identities of the characters that interact with the window but also adding nuance to that which may seem ordinary. Armstrong believes that “the [Victorian] novel is founded on glass culture,” and that, “for the [Victorian] novel, the glass panel of a window is the single most important architectural form” (183).

Not only is the glass removed from the hermit’s window-frames,

but “all the windows . . . were barred across with rough split logs of trees nailed over them” (Dickens 8). Mr. Mopes’s intentional removal of glass from his window and the barring of the window-frames suggests an unwillingness to provide outsiders with a transparent insight into his own life. Further, he refuses to exist in the “display case captivity” that windows so often create for their characters, keeping his individual identity concealed (Leonard 208). His individual identity, far from the transparent and bland ones of Traveller and Landlord, is complex and difficult to navigate, for both the characters within the novel and readers. Though it is evident from his distinct personality traits and his proper name that Mr. Mopes has a fully-developed individual identity, it provides him with no substantial advantages and is considered purely a “Nuisance,” just as a window-frame without glass could be considered a nuisance (Dickens 16).

A barred-up window intimates an equally barred-up individual—Mr. Mopes does not share his developed individual identity with outsiders. The barred window also reveals information about the hermit’s close-to-nonexistent social identity. Hollington theorizes that glass windows indicate a “longing for change and progress and the signs thereof that might be detected on the horizon” (3). By barring his windows with rough logs, however, Mopes symbolically removes any hopes of a promising future. His disregard for possible future prospects perpetuates his lowly lifestyle and prevents any change from actually occurring. His peculiar reputation (one that tends to attract bad company) is the only thing that maintains his place in the town’s socioeconomic order, and at the lowest possible rung. Dickens, along with his equally disapproving literary persona Mr. Traveller, suggests

that in a modernized society with an increasing distinction growing between classes, individuality plays no valuable role. It is solely social identity that allows one to flourish, or even exist, in society with dignity. Mopes's true sin is not his improper lifestyle or individual identity, but his refusal to take even the smallest steps towards developing a sense of sociality or enterprise.

The Landlord's window poses as the obvious antithesis to Mopes's window, revealing his promising social prospects, but also the overall superficiality of his identity. The first scene of Dickens's framework story, "Picking Up Soot and Cinders," shows a simple conversation between the Traveller, eating his breakfast, and the Landlord, stationed at the table near the window. Armstrong writes that the "isolated figure at the window" is the "endemic image of nineteenth century iconography" (33). For the course of the entire conversation, the Landlord engages in his "favorite action" of looking out the window (Dickens 2). Unlike Mopes's window, the Landlord's is clean and transparent, with the window-blind drawn down halfway. If Mopes's barred window indicates an individual with no social standing or prospects, the Landlord's glass window clearly indicates a comfortable status. However, the Landlord looks out the window not on an expansive landscape of charming domestic-life or greenery, but "at vacancy" (1). To consider the nature of glass windows is to realize that they "set up a dialogue between translucency and reflection" (Armstrong 140). In other words, windows not only show what lies beyond restrictive walls, but also the faint reflection of one's own likeness staring back. Landlord's gaze "at vacancy" was not one directed toward a vacant setting or countryside, but a "vacant" reflection staring back at him. This is apparent when Dickens writes that the

blinds were “half drawn down,” and yet Landlord “stooped a little.” Surely a pleasant landscape could have been seen even if the blinds were drawn down slightly, but Dickens later reiterates that the Landlord “stooped again, to get a more comprehensive view of vacancy under the window-blind” (Dickens 2).

The apparent “vacancy” of the Landlord’s reflective image applies both to his individual and social identity. It is evident that, without a proper name, history, or any distinguishable traits or unique features, the “vacancy” of the Landlord’s individual identity suggests that it is simply nonexistent. Social identity *is* present, however—it is clear even from his title-name that the Landlord exists comfortably and has a well-developed social identity. The “vacancy” in this sense, then, refers to the superficiality of the Landlord’s personal identity. Like the reflection one sees while looking at a window, the Landlord’s identity exists, but it is faint and translucent; the silhouette is present but there are no distinctive features that provide flavor or substance. While it is evident that Dickens disapproves of the hermit Mr. Mopes’s lifestyle, he does imply that an identity established solely on social and economic status, though necessary to flourish in society, is indeed superficial.

By depicting character interactions with glass windows, the authors of *Tom Tiddler’s Ground* add nuance to the concept of identity, implying that it is not definitive or inherited, but fragile, malleable, and easily mistaken. Utilizing windows as a literary motif, as well as employing other literary techniques such as the omission of proper names, the authors also divide individual identity and social identity, suggesting that individual-

ity serves little purpose in a modernized society focused on economy, class, and status, and that social identity is essential for socio-economic success. However, despite its importance in society, Dickens and his cohorts subtly reveal the ultimate superficiality of an identity founded solely on class and economic prospects.

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## The Earth and the Portrait: A Comparison of Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov and Prince Myshkin

Callaghan McDonough

In his major novels, Fyodor Dostoevsky sought to manifest the consequences of certain ideologies—mainly Christianity and atheism—in narrative form. In 1868, Dostoevsky published *The Idiot*, with the intent of “[depicting] the positively good man,” a sort of perfect imitation of Christ incarnated in modern Russian society (qtd. in Knapp 154). As his writing progressed, Dostoevsky soon discovered—in Myshkin’s ultimate moral failure—that “there is nothing more difficult than [this pursuit] in the world, especially nowadays” (154). Dostoevsky felt that he had not expressed “even a tenth” of what he had intended (qtd. in Miller 22). Twelve years later, Dostoevsky published his magnum opus, *The Brothers Karamazov*, partly as a second attempt at creating a “positively good man” in the character of Alyosha. This time he succeeded; Alyosha became what Myshkin failed to be.

But it can be difficult to see why. How is it that of these two men, each with the loftiest of intentions and each confronting the same world of suffering, Alyosha’s story ends in a spiritual victory, while Myshkin’s ends in spiritual squalor? A close analysis reveals that Alyosha embraces reality and becomes a triumphant Christ figure, rising figuratively above death. In contrast, Myshkin pursues an artistic reflection of reality and never exits the tomb.



### I. The First Crossroads: The Inner Person

In Dostoevsky's imaginative world, the narrative Christ figure must confront evil. When any author constructs a Christ figure, equally powerful forces of antagonism must also be introduced. For just as the biblical Christ goes to war against evil and death, so must imitations of Christ battle imitations of these same enemies. In both *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*, Alyosha and Myshkin wrestle with grim manifestations of evil; first, however, they struggle in the abstract. Having just emerged from relative isolation, Alyosha and Myshkin enter society and are forced to engage the philosophical problem of evil. This intellectual challenge foreshadows what is to come in embodied form. For each character's response to *abstract* suffering reveals the manner in which each will later engage *actual* suffering.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha's brother Ivan provides the most explicit atheistic perspective in the novel, and his argument for atheism—in the form of the problem of evil—acts as an abstract antagonist to Alyosha's faith. In its basic form, the problem of evil posits that an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being cannot coexist with evil. Evil clearly exists; therefore, God does not exist. Ivan Karamazov's formulation of this argument is addressed in the following question:

Imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the goal of making people happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but for that it was necessary and unavoidable to torture just one tiny little creation, [a] little child who [is] beating herself on the chest with her little fist, and found this edifice on

her unavenged tears, would you agree to be the architect under such conditions...? (213)

In other words, a loving God would not create a world in which even one child is tortured and killed, regardless of any further ends to be accomplished. If God does exist, Ivan argues, he has created a world of suffering that can never be truly “redeemed,” for no amount of vengeance, hell, forgiveness, or even future happiness can blot out the earthly suffering of children, who endure agony for the sake of their irresponsible Creator’s plan (212). This irresponsible Creator—whether or not he exists—is a being unworthy of worship. Ivan’s visceral and intellectually thorough “rebellion” (204)—of which this episode is only a segment—was, in Dostoevsky’s own words, a more “powerful...expression of...ideas from the atheistic point of view” than any ever seen in Europe (*Notebooks*, qtd. in *The Brothers Karamazov* 667). Much of its power comes from the fact that Dostoevsky constructed his case for atheism using actual historical accounts of child abuse from trials he had read about and attended, producing an effect that has struck many as being potent enough to topple any defense of the divine (209).

Alyosha’s response, however—delivered immediately—suggests that there is a theodicy that can withstand Ivan’s intellectual arsenal: “You said just now, is there a being in the whole world who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? But there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all *and for all*, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything” (*Brothers* 213). Whether or not this is a *sufficient* response to Ivan is beyond the scope of this essay, but Alyosha’s *offering* of this response reveals something fundamental about his character. As he is intimately acquainted

with sickness and poverty by this point, Alyosha possesses a raw understanding of the problem of evil. For him, the problem of evil is not simply an idea, a conflict confined to the mind; it is far more holistic. For this reason, Alyosha points to Christ, understanding him as a being—a living, incarnate person. Furthermore, rather than focusing upon Christ’s teaching, Alyosha focuses upon Christ’s life and death upon the cross. While on earth, Christ was one who cradled lepers, wept with the mourning, and ultimately underwent crucifixion; he knew suffering and resurrection. Following his redemptive sacrifice for humankind, Christ promised to be as spiritually present in humankind’s pain as he was while on earth. As Ivan draws his theoretical argument from historical accounts of suffering, Alyosha responds with what he believes to be a historical account of healing, one that continues to be present. Unlike an abstract theodicy, Alyosha’s “Being” is a living person, active amidst suffering and responsive to the needs of the weeping child. For Alyosha, suffering is not something that can be explained away with a theodicy; it must be tangibly alleviated through human action. This incarnate response stands in contrast to an abstract reflection of existence. As such, whether or not Alyosha provides an adequate response to the problem of evil, his human response reveals the direction he himself has chosen.

In *The Idiot*, the problem of evil arrives through a different medium, that of Hans Holbein’s painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. Ippolit Terentyev, who fills Ivan Karamazov’s role as an advocate of atheism, describes the painting’s emaciated, scarred Christ, his pallor grey, his empty eyes rolling back into his head, saying that “one has the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, dumb beast,” a “vast modern

machine which has pointlessly seized, dismembered, and devoured, in its blind and insensible fashion, a great and priceless being, a being worth all of nature and all her laws” (430). In his art criticism, Ippolit voices the atheist response to evil; this argument acts an abstract antagonist to Myshkin’s faith. Unlike Ivan’s rebellion, Ippolit rejects God not because of the absurd foundation of humankind’s ultimate harmony, but because of the absurd reality of its ultimate destruction. A nail entering the wrist of an innocent man is definitive and purely physical; no space exists in the painting’s frame for an omni-benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent Artist. In Ippolit’s interpretation, Holbein depicts Christ’s death as senseless, thoughtless, and impersonal. When a person’s life ends—particularly in a horrific manner—this defies any possibility of an all-good, all-powerful God and any possibility of resurrection for humankind. In the overwhelming presence of death, it seems impossible that God is able—or even desires—to continue humankind’s existence beyond this earth. Therefore, the Artist of this life must be indifferent Nature alone. Death, not God, splashes the final black hue of paint. Christ remains in the tomb.

While Alyosha presents a response to Ivan, Myshkin mutely faces Ippolit’s challenge. Indeed, in his own examination of Holbein’s painting, his only comment is, “A man could lose his faith looking at that picture!” (*Idiot* 229). In Platonic terms, while Ivan’s formulation of the problem of evil—being based on historical accounts—is once-removed from reality, Ippolit’s formulation results from a painting and is thus twice-removed from reality. Thus, when Myshkin engages suffering here, he is—epistemologically—a lengthy distance away from real suffering. Alyosha is much closer,

yet he evinces no fear of “[losing] his faith.” How can a mere image dispel a man’s core beliefs? This question becomes more pressing as one observes Myshkin’s frequent and exuberant assertions of commitment to Orthodox Christianity (231, 574-5). In these moments, Myshkin appears to staunchly hold his beliefs to the point of dogmatism. However, when asked directly about his personal faith, Myshkin is evasive (229, 402). Why can Myshkin pontificate about Christianity one moment, but cannot provide a defense when his beliefs are challenged? How can his dogmatic faith be undermined by paint on a canvas?

When one more closely analyzes Myshkin’s orations, the answer becomes evident. Myshkin speaks of the “concept of God,” the “idea of Christ,” “Our Christ” (*Idiot* 231, 575). He presents Christ as an idea (a specifically “Russian” idea), an image, a word that can be spoken, or a banner that one waves above one’s troops. While Alyosha portrays Christ as a three-dimensional, living “Being” who can be personally known, Myshkin provides no evidence of belief in an actual God; he sees a two-dimensional image of Christ (213). For this reason, Holbein’s painting is enough to topple his faith; an image displaces an image. Why is this the case? Just as Myshkin’s cherished beliefs are two-dimensional, so is his inner existence; he lacks the kind of experiential self-knowledge required for spiritual depth. Thus, when confronted by questions of his own being, he possesses no response. These questions concern his reality, and Myshkin’s mind—freshly removed from a Swiss asylum—is still dwelling in the abstract. Unlike Alyosha, who—in response to Ivan—moves from abstract ideas to the gritty reality of the world, specifically in his complex family relations, Myshkin’s

mind remains fixated upon an imagined, artistic reflection of the world. These internal changes—or lack thereof—provide the first inklings of each man’s approaching fate.

## II. The Second Crossroads: The Other

The next major crossroads for each protagonist concerns the Other. Each has begun to choose how he will conceptually view the world; now, each must decide how he will view other people—specifically, certain beautiful women in his life. Alyosha’s and Myshkin’s interactions with particular women provide the clearest glimpse into their moral characters, revealing their incarnate solidity or “excarnate” vacuity (cf. Taylor 556).

Alyosha’s father and brothers, in describing the woman Grushenka—for whom they romantically compete—fashion a glamorized caricature. She becomes a kind of sexualized goddess in the imagination of young Alyosha. Continuing the destructive family pattern, Alyosha willfully resolves to wield her as a weapon in his own rebellion against God, following the death of Father Zosima, Alyosha’s mentor. With Grushenka—in a black silk dress—“nestling” like a “kitten” on his lap, Alyosha’s glossy imaginings have come to life (300). The Karamazov (“black smear”) has awoken within Alyosha, and he plans to indulge it, succumbing to the image. In other words, Alyosha plans to engage in a sexual act with Grushenka, but one that defies recognition of the act’s self-giving, other-honoring element; it is intended to be angry, egocentric, and degrading.

But in this “critical moment,” Alyosha allows his expectations to be upended by reality and, as a result, he comes to a deeper understanding

of the Other (*Brothers* 291, cf. Weil 65). Faced with the actual embodied person of Grushenka, Alyosha discerns her kindness and cannot commit the act that his father would; the surname's dominion is limited, and the "Alyosha" ("defender of man") has risen in defense. For the woman before him is exactly that—a woman!—a three-dimensional human person with her own hopes, fears, insecurities, and imperfections. She is not a possession or a conquest or a painting, but a "treasure" (302). The curtain of lust and prejudice is thus torn in two, and Alyosha perceives a "sister" sitting on his knee (305).

In perceiving the reality of another—a selfless pursuit of understanding—Alyosha draws Grushenka into his manner of seeing. In her designs, he, too, had been a conquest—a projection of judgmental purity to be defiled (*Brothers* 301). Alyosha was to be her rebellion, not against God, but against the other Karamazov men, who seek to control her, and Alyosha, who she believes has judged her (304).

But Alyosha's attention prompts reciprocation. Her remorse upon learning of Zosima's death, followed by her leaping from his knee in shame, displays authenticity, not manipulation. Something remarkable has occurred, and it is a turning point for both characters, but especially for Alyosha. With the subsequent forming of a relationship—the two becoming siblings in suffering—each is drawn from their shadowy projections into a very earthbound intimacy. In becoming proximate to each other—and truly attending to each other—object becomes person, and person becomes family. Alyosha has learned to move from abstraction to reality, appearance to being. In his previous fear of evil, Alyosha had hidden behind monastery

walls; now he emerges from within the monastery of his own mind. He expected to find “treasure” only in those like Zosima: the “saints” (*Brothers* 302). In his interaction with Grushenka, however, he learns that beauty and goodness can be found even in one who shoulders the societal yoke of “sinner.” Alyosha discovers that when he embraces others’ embodied realities—in this case, quite literally—he may find the joy of a mutually-redeeming relationship.

But where Alyosha succeeds, Myshkin fails. As Myshkin becomes further entrenched in Russian society, the face of Christ is not the only image vying for his devotion. He is also confronted by the portrait of the breathtaking Nastasya. Myshkin’s strange, impulsive response to his first viewing of this image—the kiss—cannot be over-emphasized (*Idiot* 85). In Myshkin’s kiss on the canvas, he pledges himself to the fictional image. Why does Myshkin kiss the portrait but gaze in stupefaction at the actual woman? The answer is simple: for Myshkin, the portrait *is*—in almost every sense—the woman. Myshkin’s enraptured gaze rests on a two-dimensional projection.

Indeed, Myshkin—“afraid to look at [women]”—never truly does (*Idiot* 82). Throughout the novel, Nastasya’s actual behavior conflicts with the beauty of her portrait, and Myshkin is unable to reconcile the difference (124). Seeing a created image, he imposes this created image on the actual person. As a result, Myshkin is voluntarily blind to Nastasya’s reality. “In you everything is perfection...no one would wish to see you different,” he tells her, a statement that—while flattering—is far from the truth (148). Nastasya is not the only victim of Myshkin’s blindness. Aglaya, too, is one



wondrous “portrait” that he sees “as an object a mile away from where he is” (364). Existing at a permanent distance from the knowledge of Aglaya’s and Nastasya’s actual natures—their intricacies, flaws, and desires—Myshkin objectifies and idealizes them. Unlike Alyosha, who develops a proximate and physical connection to a fully-realized, flesh-and-blood woman, Myshkin sees women as installations in an art gallery.

Myshkin’s inability to see women as persons is ultimately the result of fear. As Myshkin says, he is afraid to look at Aglaya’s face (*Idiot* 82), and he says, “I cannot bear Nastasya Filippovna’s face...I’m afraid of her face!” (616-7). He much prefers to gaze upon the women’s portraits than to meet their eyes, as he fears the intimacy of an actual relationship. For this reason, he objectifies Nastasya and Aglaya, seeing them as portraits even when he is with them. He would prefer not to discover their imperfections through a relationship; rather, if they can remain “stopping points,” colorful idols with a manufactured façade of perfection, he can continue to worship them—from a safe distance (Marion 10-11). Just as he replaced Christ with an image, so he does with women.

For this is Myshkin’s desire: to worship his idea of each woman, or more specifically, each woman’s beauty. Myshkin is profoundly moved by beauty; it has the power of salvation over him (*Idiot* 402). Rowan Williams calls Myshkin a “man with no history” (51). Myshkin does possess a history, however; it is simply a history of alienation. In Russian society, he remains as much an “outcast” from the “chorus” of life as he was in the Swiss asylum; thus, he is seeking an entry point into the world (*Idiot* 446). “Beauty” becomes this entry point. But when Myshkin sees Nastasya or Aglaya, he

experiences a feeling, and he calls this “beauty.” When he pursues beauty, he is—in actuality—pursuing the feeling that results from seeing the woman; he is not pursuing the woman herself. As a result, he loves like a “disembodied spirit,” a ghost worshipping a mirage (617). He can kiss Nastasya’s two-dimensional portrait—and later, Aglaya’s love letter—but never the three-dimensional woman (85, 380). Each kiss is an attempt to be swallowed up by beauty, to achieve a “profound experience of infinite happiness” (238). But what he truly needs and desires is an intimate relationship. While Alyosha is willing to be “spiritually completed by others” through a relationship (Wyman 177), Myshkin is indecisive, unable to commit to either Aglaya or Nastasya; he tells Yevgeni Pavlovich that he wants to love them both (*Idiot* 617). Both women are tortured by this lack of commitment. Myshkin, however, does not recognize his fault, for how does one commit to a picture?

As before, Myshkin is longing to escape his dreamlike reality, but he continues to doggedly chase dreams. He longs to be “saved by beauty,” but his beauty is not salvific or an antidote to alienation (*Idiot* 402). Perceiving human beings as pictures imprisons him in a kind of solipsism, surrounded by moving images crossing the retina. At this point in our analysis, this is Myshkin’s fate. Coming into St. Petersburg, he says, “I have no experience of women at all” (14). After months in Russia, he still has none.

### III. The Final Crossroads: Engaging the World

Thus far, we have analyzed two crossroads on Myshkin’s and Alyosha’s respective paths—paths leading toward their contrasting fates. We have seen how each man views his world and how each views other specific

individuals in his life. In reality, these have been paths to potential incarnation. As Christ was to become actually incarnate in the world, so each Christ figure is to become incarnate in Dostoevsky's narrative world. At each crossroads, the underlying question has been: will each Christ figure move toward becoming incarnate in his narrative world? Will each see the reality of suffering not only abstractly but also in embodied persons?

Now, we arrive at the final crossroads on this path to incarnation. Will Alyosha and Myshkin fully *enter* the world? Possessing a view of reality, will they now *engage* in that reality? The previous crossroads focused upon each man's perceptions; here we focus on their actions. We have seen the beginnings of each man's interactions with others, Alyosha's being more positive than Myshkin's. However, at this third crossroads, each man ultimately decides who he will become—a man of action, or a man of dreams.

The monastery garden is the site of Alyosha's successful incarnation as a Christ figure. In Grushenka, Alyosha has glimpsed reality through the forging of a deep relationship. However, in her reality he has also witnessed pain. Upon his return to the monastery, we can understand Alyosha as confronting the question that has dominated his life since his return to Skotoprigonevsk. He has chosen the monastic path partly as a desire to escape from suffering; now, he must ask himself whether his entire life will be one of comfortable isolation. Father Païssy's juxtaposed reading reveals that Christ's first miracle occurred in Cana of Galilee; there, Christ had to decide whether it was time to make himself known to society and enter public life. Alyosha, perhaps, realizes that he, too, faces this choice. Clear, pure water is life-giving, but Christ chose to transform it into the more worldly and rich-

er wine, which brought gladness to the world. Will Alyosha do the same?

Alyosha's dream represents a temporary relapse into a state of safe unconsciousness, yet even there, reality beckons in the form of a vision to which Alyosha responds. The stars offer him a future of contemplation. Casting aside that hope, however, Alyosha chooses instead to embrace the earth. He even kisses the soil—earthy actuality (not a painted portrait). Alyosha knows that with this embrace will come suffering; he weeps over the earth, and all who are in it, for he loves them. Yet in embracing the finite, he has also received the ecstasy of the infinite; the “vault of heaven” has entered his soul (*Brothers* 312). Like a Kierkegaardian knight of faith, he “makes the movement of infinity and [gets] finitude out of it;” he lowers his eyes from the skies in order to express the “sublime in the pedestrian” (Kierkegaard 70). Here, Alyosha has embraced the real and received the exaltation of dreams. Thus, when he rises up and leaves the monastery—reflecting his dream of the risen Christ—he does so as a “resolute champion” (*Brothers* 312). A champion over his previous fear and voluntary blindness, he has indeed acquired a greater resolution and become the fully incarnate Christ figure that he will remain for the rest of the narrative.

In contrast, the Yepanchin family's dinner party is the site of Myshkin's failed incarnation. Like Alyosha in the monastery, Myshkin stands on the edge, looking out upon a world that promises harm. Alyosha has made a deep connection with a person in that world—Grushenka—but Myshkin possesses no such connection; he is adrift. His situation harkens back to his condition in Switzerland; as he stands in the corner of the party, observing this “grand festival,” he continues to fear that he will remain an

outcast (*Idiot* 446). As then, he continues to “comprehend nothing” (446). Myshkin has no suspicion of concealed undercurrents of ulterior motives, corrupt histories, secret hatreds. His eyes dwell on the “superb artistic veneer” of everything (564). He does not suspect that this veneer might cover the lid of a coffin, concealing stale, rotting air. Distracted by society’s golden façade, he fails to comprehend its essence. As Myshkin treats the women in his life, so he treats the world.

Myshkin is, however, increasingly desperate to enter reality, to make a human connection. “Choked with goodness” at the beauty that surrounds him, he longs to embrace the world as Alyosha does (*Idiot* 572). He longs to experience “fusion with the supreme synthesis of life,” like the wholeness Alyosha finds (237). But when he attempts to engage the other party guests, he unleashes a boisterous diatribe against the Catholic Church and asserts the preeminence of the Russian Orthodox Church. He longs to know others and to be known, but when he opens his mouth, a torrent of nationalistic ideology emerges. Seeing society as a beautiful two-dimensional image, and approaching it in fear, he can only engage it with abstract ideas. Just as Myshkin treats God as an intangible concept or image, so he also treats the world.

When Myshkin finally lapses into unconsciousness, the physical parallels the spiritual. Myshkin inwardly withdraws from reality, and his true self remains hidden from those who might know him. His inner nature—once only revealed through his understanding of God—is now being manifested in his interactions, first with specific individuals, and now with society. In his fear, Myshkin has seen only images and contributed

only ideas; he has thus failed to engage reality. The would-be “Christ figure” never becomes incarnate.

Yet, incarnate or not, Alyosha and Myshkin must complete the Christ narrative.

#### IV. Gethsemane

Shortly before the crucifixion, Christ prays on his knees in the garden of Gethsemane. He beseeches, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (*Holy Bible*, Matt. 26:39). In this moment, Christ is determining whether or not he must bear the cross, suffering for the sake of love. Determining that he must, Christ then goes on to endure Calvary, dying by crucifixion; three days later, he emerges resurrected from the tomb. Toward the ends of *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Myshkin and Alyosha enter their own gardens of Gethsemane. But while Christ determined whether or not to bear his cross, each Christ figure must decide *how* to bear it; for each, the cross is inevitable. Each man’s decision in his “Gethsemane” determines the nature of his Calvary, and ultimately, his duration in the tomb.

We can interpret Alyosha’s and Myshkin’s Gethsemanes as being the homes of Lise Khokhlakova and Nastasya Fillipovna, respectively. Here, Alyosha stands before Lise—the “little demon”—who bears fragments of their broken betrothal (*Brothers* 489). Myshkin, on the contrary, beholds not an aftermath but a potentiality, with two polar paths before his feet. He considers Aglaya, whose character promises consistent attachment, and, simultaneously, Nastasya, whose turbulent nature promises a flux between

intimacy and alienation. For Alyosha and Myshkin both, a crucial time of decision has arrived.

The decision that unites each of these scenes, such that both can be called “Gethsemane,” is the following: Christ asked for reprieve in the garden of Gethsemane. He did not want the cross; he wanted its redemptive result. Suffering was not an end; it was a means to a greater end: love. In Dostoevsky’s Christ figures’ Gethsemanes, each must determine his own ultimate purpose. Will he bear the cross for the sake of love, or for the sake of suffering as a perverse end in itself?

Alyosha, when he abandons his novice’s cassock, does so realizing that suffering accompanies love; with Lise, however, he realizes that suffering—simply for suffering’s sake—is not something to choose either. Alyosha desires to heal Lise of her anguish. As with Grushenka, he is “kenotically attentive” to her, humbly emptying himself so that he can receive her reality (Contino 69). He promises to always love and weep for her; the two actions will be inseparable, for his love of her tortured soul will cause him to suffer. He recognizes, however, that he cannot heal her tortured soul by marrying her. To do so, in effect, would be to marry her suffering—to chain himself to it. For it would be pity, not romance, that would bind Alyosha to Lise now. This urge of pity would ultimately dishonor her and destroy him. Here, unlike with Grushenka, it is distance, as opposed to proximity, which allows for love—love of both Lise and himself. In order to love both Lise and himself, he must stay whole, and commitment to her would require that he be torn asunder. For this reason, when forced out the door, he leaves. In effect, this final action begins Alyosha’s Calvary. Alyosha bears the

cross of Lise's suffering, the natural consequence of his love for her. However, he does not choose to bear this cross in a way that will destroy him. He is a Christ figure, not Christ; he can accept the cross, but in order to rise again, he cannot cling to it.

On the contrary, Myshkin plans to marry himself to the suffering Nastasya. Faced with a choice between a woman who offers simple love—Aglaya—and a woman who offers passionate suffering—Nastasya—he chooses the latter. Here, Myshkin again falls prey to a kind of aesthetic “intoxication,” whereby he continues to pursue beautiful images (*Idiot* 614). Myshkin is seduced by others' picturesque suffering. It is not only Nastasya's beauty that holds him spellbound, but also the “great deal of suffering” in her face (85). His desire to witness suffering is partly driven by a kind of visceral urge to experience pain, and, ultimately, to see death, because death appears beautiful. This morbid passion for Nastasya, akin to Myshkin's morbid interest in the Holbein, reveals a psychological pattern that will culminate in his ultimate end in Rogozhin's house, with his final attraction to both the dead Nastasya and her murderer reflecting the novel's earlier foreshadowing.

But while Myshkin is enchanted by the aesthetic nature of suffering, he is not content simply to observe it; he wants to heal it. He is drawn to Nastasya as to a “pitiful, ailing child,” not unlike his earlier interactions with Marie in Switzerland (*Idiot* 624). Myshkin himself believes that he loves Nastasya out of “pity” and “compassion” (458), “not love” (218). But in order to heal this suffering, Myshkin oversteps the bounds of pity. Instead, he attempts to heal *through* suffering. This urge seems to be a strain



of *nadryv*—a psychological phenomenon observed throughout Dostoevsky’s works. As Robert L. Belknap explains, “*Nadryv* has been rendered as ‘laceration,’ and is derived from *rvat*, to ‘rend,’ ‘tear,’ ‘burst,’ ‘split’... *nadryv* causes a person to hurt himself in order to hurt others, or, perversely, to hurt others in order to hurt himself” (37-8). Edward Wasiolek further observes, “*Nadryv* is for Dostoevsky a purposeful and pleasurable self-hurt. . . . a primal psychological fact. It is the impulse in the hearts of men that separates one man from another” (160). Unlike typical *nadryv*, Myshkin has no intention of harming others; he does, however, have every intention of harming himself. His love is a kind of lacerative, romantic love, whereby he desires to help “the suffering” so much that he will undergo unnecessary suffering; this healing-by-*nadryv* goes well beyond what is required or even possible.

Why choose to suffer? Myshkin mistakenly views suffering as his final opportunity for incarnation. On some level, he recognizes that incarnation requires love. And he believes that suffering, in itself, will be the means to love. In Myshkin’s mind, if it does not hurt, it is not love. Thus, in a final act of desperation, he decides to tortuously indulge in suffering in order to enter and save the world. He chooses crucifixion, by itself, in order to achieve liberation from his perpetual loneliness. But suffering does not end Myshkin’s alienation; he wounds himself in order to heal others, yet, being wounded, he requires healing himself. Aglaya presents this opportunity to Myshkin. Aglaya offers a peaceful and intimate relationship, one that would free him from his solipsistic prison. Instead, he chooses to marry an inconstant and tormented woman. He bears a cross that will devour him.

The love of Christ that accepts suffering is Alyosha's initial answer to Ivan's challenge. In responding to Lise's suffering, Alyosha embodies this response: he bears the cross of suffering out of love—choosing love and accepting suffering. On the contrary, Myshkin bears the cross in order to find love. As a result, he chooses suffering in itself, and denies love. Inflicting suffering on himself—partly in an attempt to battle evil and suffering—he actually compounds the problem of evil. For this self-inflicted suffering, too, may require a theodicy. In this attitude, one chooses the cross when offered a simpler and equally effective option. One chooses Christ in the tomb over Christ resurrected. This tomb is each man's ultimate fate.

#### V. The Entombed Christ and the Risen Christ

Alyosha and Myshkin, having now accepted their crosses, reach Calvary. Arriving there, each re-discovers the problem of evil, but now in its real, incarnate form, the form in which it was embraced by Christ.

At the funeral of Ilyusha, Ivan's argument symbolically comes to life. Where before Alyosha philosophized about child suffering, he now stands in its presence. The twelve grieving children demand a response. Can Alyosha now offer an adequate response? This is Alyosha's final test. Standing beside the stone under which Ilyusha was initially to be buried, Alyosha begins to encourage the children. "Let us remember his face, and his clothes, and his poor little boots," he exhorts (*Brothers* 646). "Don't run from reality," he seems to be saying, "Don't let grief drive you into forgetting your friend." Even as he encourages them to face their current reality, however, Alyosha also urges them to anticipate a future reality, that of the life to

come: “Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and gladly, joyfully will tell each other all that has happened” (646). Like Christ, Alyosha, the “resolute champion,” stands next to a stone under which no corpse resides. He brings hope to the myopic in the presence of the grave. And at the end of the novel, he walks out of the graveyard. The figurative Christ has entered the tomb and emerged again, bringing life to the twelve figurative disciples who surround him.

Myshkin, too, enters a tomb: Rogozhin’s house. With the discovery of Nastasya’s corpse, the sepulchral element of Holbein’s painting has come to life, though the painting lacks its primary subject. Can Myshkin respond where he could not before? He cannot, and he remains entombed. Seeing such aesthetically beautiful suffering, he is mesmerized. Lured by the dark glow of this living portrait, he longs to be consumed by it, to become for a moment a brilliant, dancing ash. Thinking he is pursuing reality, Myshkin has always been preparing to return to the Holbein portrait. He leaves Switzerland like an image stepping from a frame. Yet he continues to see the world as an artwork, populated with beautiful images. He seeks to engage with picturesque pain through the emotional turmoil of self-inflicted suffering, but only becomes more distant. Ultimately, Myshkin’s final act is consistent with this pattern. In the novel’s final scene, Myshkin strokes the face of Rogozhin, Nastasya’s murderer, and slips into insanity (*Idiot* 648). Thus, he becomes the subject of his own painting, the dead Christ of Holbein.

In *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky sought to incarnate two Christ figures. One man—Myshkin—stands at a distance, beholding the world as a portrait that he both loves and fears. Ultimately,

this man chooses death for fear of life, and Dostoevsky returns him to his frame—a dead image. The other man—Alyosha—“falls to the ground” like a kernel of wheat (*Holy Bible*, John 12:24). Literally and figuratively, he kisses the earth, finding both seeds of faith and the ashes of suffering. It is for this realist embrace that, in the end, he rises as new wheat by the hand of Dostoevsky.

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When Life Imitates Art: Aestheticism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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“**T**He truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!”

(*Importance* 828). With this declaration, Oscar Wilde’s sensational character Algernon unknowingly highlights a central concern not only of his age but of all who love art and literature: the relationship of truth and beauty in art. Writing late in the Victorian Age, Wilde stood at the head of the controversial aesthetic movement, which challenged those arguing that art should prioritize truth by imitating life and should teach its readers morality. Instead, aesthetes affirmed art’s intrinsic value and measured art’s success not by its truthfulness but by its beauty—understood by aesthetes like Wilde and Walter Pater as “something immediately experienced, felt upon the pulses—not a bloodless abstraction ... [it was] a blanket term covering the impressions we receive and enjoy” (Johnson 3). Wilde pushed the aesthetic agenda still further: like art, good criticism should not seek to record an artistic object’s true nature but should record the viewer’s impressions of the work, regardless of accuracy, and life itself should imitate and become a beautiful work of art, even if this beauty is a lie. Unsurprisingly, Wilde’s convictions about the nature of art and criticism manifest themselves in his literary works, especially through his characters’ lifestyles in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, though close analysis of the play reveals a dimension of beauty that

Wilde fails to articulate in his own theorizing. Through their creation and interpretation of fictional identities, Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen, and Cecily become Wildean aesthetic artists and critics, ultimately nuancing Wilde's theory by representing truth as a criterion for beauty.

To begin, Jack Worthing, the main character of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, applies Wilde's aesthetic theories by using several fictional identities for himself, thus transforming his life into a work of art. As Alexandra Poulain argues, throughout the play writing becomes a tool to recreate Jack's identity. When Mr. Cardew discovered Jack abandoned in a handbag with no clues regarding Jack's true identity, Mr. Cardew decided to "construct" a fictional identity for Jack by naming him and later making "him Cecily's guardian in his will, literally creating the 'serious' Jack of the country" (297). Jack's identity in this way resembles a work of literature, for it is both fictional and came into existence through writing. Interestingly, understanding Jack as living literature corresponds well with Wilde's thoughts on art and life, for Wilde argued in "The Decay of Lying" that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (320). Joseph McQueen explains Wilde's point by saying, "[L]ife and nature reach out beyond themselves in order to find intelligibility through art" (868). Art, and particularly literature, offers a series of experiences that are unified and coherent, something life is not on its own. This experience of coherence brings pleasure to the viewer, and just as art offers this pleasure that the aesthetes associated with beauty, so also should life, according to Wilde. Similarly, developing a fictional identity for himself and, in a sense, becoming a work of literature allows Jack to find this intelligibility that art possesses, for his new identity

is better able to clarify and to unify Jack's experiences and sense of self than the sad reality that he was abandoned and has no knowledge of his origins. Thus, Jack's life imitates and even becomes a work of art.

Jack goes beyond creating one fictional identity for himself, however, and creates a fictional brother, Ernest, who further demonstrates Jack's adherence to Wilde's aesthetic understanding of life and literature. Jack pretends to be Ernest when he arrives in town, providing him with an escape from the responsibilities of Jack Worthing. Jack literally writes this identity into existence with the visiting cards marked "Ernest Worthing" that Algernon discusses in the first act of the play. Again, Jack's life imitates art, for, like an author, he writes himself a fictional identity that then allows him to pursue the exciting life he cannot have in his day-to-day life as Jack Worthing. For Jack, taking on the role of author and writing his own identities for himself provides him with a "beautiful" life that the realities of life cannot deliver. Nevertheless, this fictional identity is false, demonstrating that in order to achieve the life he wants, Jack, like an aesthete, must prioritize beauty over truth. Thus, Jack exemplifies Wilde's thesis that life should imitate art, and that art should be beautiful rather than truthful, by creating an intelligible and exciting life for himself through fictional identities.

Like Jack, Algernon also creates fictional identities for himself and in this way applies Wilde's theories about literature to his own life. Algernon has three identities: his real identity of Algernon, the invalid Bunbury whom Algernon uses as an excuse to escape social engagements, and Jack's wicked younger brother Ernest, the persona Algernon adopts in order to meet and win the heart of Cecily. Both fictional characters clearly resem-



ble art more than reality. Algernon's supposed self-sacrificial tending to his invalid friend confers on Algernon's character an air of nobility and kindness that does not often exist in real life, and Bunbury's habit of always falling ill at the most convenient times for Algernon seems unlikely in everyday life but more probable in the realm of literature. Algernon's character Ernest, meanwhile, closely parallels the anti-heroes of Romantic literature, wicked men who nevertheless fall in love with beautiful women and as a result change their ways. In this way Algernon writes his own story, and these stories mirror the romance and coincidence of art and literature far more than the occurrences of daily life, while also allowing Algernon to pursue the pleasures not permitted to him by the social customs of the day. Algernon certainly puts Wilde's maxim into practice in his own life through his shameless employment of fictional identities.

While the men of the play adopt fictional identities for themselves and thus create works of literature out of their lives, Gwendolen and Cecily become Wildean critics of these "texts," preferring their own impressions over reality and creating their own works of art based on the works they critique. Wilde articulates this vision for what aesthetic literary criticism should look like in *The Critic as Artist*, in which he argues that "the highest criticism really is . . . the record of one's own soul," further adding, "His sole aim is to chronicle his own impressions" and "Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter?" (817-818). For Wilde, criticism should not and cannot attempt to dissect a work in order to understand the one true meaning it communicates. Instead of seeking some sort of truth, the critic should share his own understanding

of the beauty of the work. Gwendolen, in her interpretation of the fictional “text” of Jack, follows Wilde’s advice. The “Ernest Worthing” that Gwendolen falls in love with is, in effect, a fiction rather than a true person, and so Gwendolen’s interpretation of this character parallels the role of a literary critic. Interestingly, however, Gwendolen does not wait to interpret Jack until meeting him but rather develops her opinion of him beforehand: “The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you” (*Importance* 831-832). At this point Gwendolen has had no interactions with “Ernest” and therefore has no evidence that her romantic impressions of him are true. Nevertheless, Gwendolen does not care about the validity of her interpretation of “Ernest” but rather indulges her own romantic impressions of him regardless of their truth. In this way Gwendolen acts as the ideal Wildean critic by interpreting Jack according to her own impressions and desires rather than some standard of reality.

Not only does Wilde recommend that critics record their own impressions of beautiful artwork, but also that critics craft new works of beauty out of these works of art, another way in which Gwendolen conforms to Wilde’s vision of criticism. In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde argues that “[the highest criticism] treats the work of art simply as a starting point for a new creation” (819). Criticism goes beyond recording one’s reactions and thus becomes a new form of art, as the critic takes a previous work and then creates more art out of it. Gwendolen’s romance with Jack certainly accomplishes this task. Sarah Balkin argues that Gwendolen “inhabits [an] author-narrator role,” for she has in effect invented her own romance, falling in

love with Jack simply based on his name rather than allowing the romance to develop naturally (37). This decision to love Jack then informs all their subsequent interactions when they do meet in person, making it impossible for a flirtation and then a romance not to form. Balkin further elaborates that, “By narrating fictional accounts of [her] own [life], Gwendolen ... anticipate[s] and shape[s] [that life] and, in conjunction with the other characters, the action of the play” (37). Like Wilde’s ideal critic, Gwendolen builds on an artwork and creates a more beautiful work out of it—in this case, her romance with Ernest, which shapes not only her life but the lives of the other characters in the play. Thus, Gwendolen provides another example of how the characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* practice aesthetic theory in the context of their everyday life.

Cecily perhaps even more closely conforms to Wilde’s ideal of an aesthetic critic than does Gwendolen, as demonstrated by her lavish indulgence of her romantic impressions as she interprets Algernon’s fictional “Ernest.” Cecily develops an immense interest in Jack’s wicked “brother” Ernest, and though she has never met him, she falls in love with the person she imagines him to be and then, even more ridiculously, pretends to be engaged to him. By doing so, Cecily acts as a Wildean critic, interpreting the fictional Ernest based on her own whimsical impressions rather than on any sort of reality. Furthermore, she develops only positive impressions of Ernest, despite the understandable possibility of interpreting him negatively, another aspect of Wilde’s philosophy of criticism. In his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde states, “Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those

who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty" (822). Not only should critics record their own impressions, but a good critic will recognize the beauty inherent in a work and will allow it to produce not ugly but only beautiful impressions within him. Interestingly, Wilde does not concern himself with finding true meanings in art, because he does not believe truth matters in art. Instead, there is only beauty or ugliness. Cecily indeed is one of the "elect" that Wilde mentions, for not only is Ernest a piece of art in that he is entirely a work of fiction, but she reads into this text not the ugly meaning of a wicked man that many would read into it, but rather finds the "beautiful meaning" of an interesting, complex man for her to love and reform. Thus, Cecily proves to be the ideal Wildean critic by finding only the beauty rather than the ugly in Algernon's work of art and basing her interpretation around these impressions of beauty.

Like Gwendolen, Cecily not only ignores the truth by choosing to interpret her lover based on her own impressions and desires, but she also creates more art out of her interpretation, particularly demonstrated in her pretend engagement to Algernon. In keeping up the illusion of this make-believe relationship, Cecily even goes so far as to write letters from "Ernest" to herself and to buy herself a ring and bangle on behalf of "Ernest" (*Importance* 849). She also records in her journal the significant events of her engagement, including when she broke off the engagement for a week. Commenting further on these journal entries, Poulain argues that Cecily, like Jack, uses writing to create a new reality: "[T]he letters she writes to herself on behalf of 'Ernest' are fabrications which supplement his absence

and create a whole pathological being out of paper and ink” (295). In fact, she has created such a clear character for this Ernest that, “when Algy finally appears at the Manor House, he has only to impersonate the emotional character which she has created in writing” (295). Much like the critic who takes up his pen to create new art based on the art he interprets, Cecily uses writing to add new life to the fictional “Ernest.” The world she creates mirrors the plot of a romance novel, complete with wicked men who reform themselves out of love and the drama of broken and renewed engagements. Cecily, like the other characters, finds the world of art far more beautiful and compelling than the real world, and so as a critic she not only embraces the beauty of the fictional Ernest but continues to develop it. Furthermore, she knows that her fictional romance is false, but for her it does not matter whether it is true or false as long as its beauty brings her pleasure. Thus, Cecily joins the other characters in creating a work of art out of her life.

However, though Gwendolen and Cecily at first willingly comply with Wilde’s vision for literary critics, after discovering the truth about Jack and Algernon, their relationship to Wilde’s aesthetic criticism becomes more complicated. When the girls believe that Jack and Algernon’s “art” corresponds to reality, Gwendolen and Cecily remain delighted with their lovers and find “beautiful meanings” in this art, following Wilde’s recommendation for critics in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (822). And even when they realize the men have lied to them, they are still willing to find “beautiful meanings” in their words, even if their words do not actually correspond to reality but are a fiction, an art. When Algernon explains to Cecily that he lied about being Ernest so that he could meet her, Cecily

says to Gwendolen, “That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?” (*Importance* 858). Gwendolen questions whether Cecily can believe Algernon, to which Cecily answers, “I don’t. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer” and Gwendolen replies, “True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing” (858). Timothy Peltason analyzes this passage and connects the girls’ focus on style to “the central themes of Wilde’s criticism,” that is, the critic’s duty is not to explain the object as it really is but to build on the work and create a greater work of art (130-133). In other words, Cecily is satisfied with Algernon’s response, not because of its truthfulness, but because of the beauty she finds in it, and so she does not delve deeper into the true meaning behind his words but rather gladly accepts her own beautiful understanding of the situation. Gwendolen furthermore encourages this value of beauty over truth in her words. At first, then, Cecily and Gwendolen continue to abide by Wilde’s ideals for aesthetic criticism.

Nevertheless, though the girls are willing to read beautiful meanings into the “art” of the men without regard to truth, there is one point on which the girls will not move: the name of Ernest. After the girls whisper together about whether to forgive the men, they return to Jack and Algernon with the reply, “Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!” (*Importance* 858). The artistic stories that Gwendolen and Cecily have each devised in their own imaginations in response to Jack and Algernon hold such a grip on them that they refuse to sacrifice their ideals. The girls have followed Wilde’s theory of criticism and have created their own artwork in response to the men’s art, but when faced with the truth

that the men's lives are indeed art, are "Life imitat[ing] Art," and that their own criticism is thus art as well, they seem to reject Wilde's theory. Now reality must conform to their art, which means that Jack and Algernon's art must become reality as well. Only when Jack and Algernon declare "But we are going to be christened this afternoon" (858), thus transforming their fictional identities into realities, do the girls forgive the men and accept them as fiancés once more. It is one thing to admire art when it is meant to be art, but for the girls of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, if life is to imitate art, this art must nevertheless become a reality.

If *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a test case for Wilde's literary theory, then Gwendolen and Cecily's complicated relationship with their roles as critics implies that beauty and truth both have an essential role in interpretation, a claim that supersedes Wilde's aesthetic criticism. Wilde's play allows him to explore the implications of characters living as works of art and as critics of others' art. However, at least in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the dichotomy Wilde sets up between truth and beauty breaks down, with the two concepts becoming one and the same. Wilde criticizes art that attempts to be "true" to life, but Gwendolen and Cecily's refusal to accept Jack and Algernon indicates that they do not find the falsity of the "Ernest" story beautiful. Instead, this story is only beautiful if it is also true. Of course, the actual truth is not beautiful to them—it is not a "beautiful" work of art that Jack is named Jack or that Algernon is named Algernon—but beauty cannot be beautiful unless it is true. Wilde's test-case

demonstrates that his aesthetic literary criticism only goes so far. While art is beautiful, irrespective of its truth, and life seems more beautiful when it imitates art in this way, at some point truth becomes as valuable as beauty and even becomes part of beauty, a nuance Wilde does not draw out in his theorizing.

Wilde experiments with his detailed aesthetic literary theory in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Arguing that art's purpose is not to tell the truth but to be beautiful, that life should imitate the beauty of art, and that criticism should create a new work of art out of the critic's impressions, Wilde populates his play with characters who practice this philosophy in the fictional lives they have created for themselves. However, while Cecily and Gwendolen at first adhere to Wilde's aesthetic standard for criticism, eventually truth becomes a criterion for beauty for the girls, demonstrated by their initial rejection of Algernon and Jack. Wilde may dismiss the importance of truth in art, but when his theory is applied to lives rather than art, truth becomes a necessity. Thus, Wilde's theory proves limited—in the end, his characters find some form of beauty in truth that makes truth necessary even in works of art. Of course, the characters in Wilde's play who draw out this point are, in themselves, art, and beyond that, potential objects of satire. Perhaps, after all, the relationship between truth and beauty expressed in *The Importance of Being Earnest* functions in the play merely to make the play beautiful, and funny. Yet however one chooses to interpret the play, Wilde's characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* embody Wilde's aestheticism and provoke serious thought on the meaning of beauty and truth.



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Looking Through, At, and Beyond in *Thelma and Louise*

Mercer Greenwald

At the beginning of Ridley Scott's 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*, the title characters prepare to set off for a weekend trip to a friend's cabin in the mountains.

Thelma asks Louise what to pack and Louise tells her to take her husband Daryl's fishing equipment. Thelma responds by saying "Louise, I don't know how to fish." Louise tells her "Neither do I, Thelma, but Daryl does it, how hard can it be?" (Khourie 9).<sup>1</sup> Although Thelma and Louise never have the chance to fish, they both appropriate a variety of other stereotypically masculine behaviors throughout the film. Louise shoots to kill and rejects the commitment of marriage; Thelma has sex for pleasure and robs a convenience store. Together, Thelma and Louise take narrative control of a classic masculine story.

Shari Roberts argues that the western and road movie genres present shallow, caricatured visions of femininity, where female characters serve as plot-developing devices, aiding the hero in his own personal evolution. Women are limited to a set of male-envisioned tropes: the temptress, a "foil to the laconic, macho, male actor," or the morally correct wife or daughter. In all of these cases, women "[figure] as helpless, parasitic embellishments to a masculine genre" (62). This tendency is inextricably linked to what Laura Mulvey describes in her seminal 1975 work as "the male gaze" (qtd. in Rob-

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to *Thelma & Louise*, I will be citing the 1991 screenplay by Calie Khourie, unless it is inconsistent with Scott's film, in which case I will cite the film directly, indicating hour and minute with 00:00.

erts 62). Mulvey argues that the dominant trends in Hollywood film serve the masculine unconscious: because most directors are male, the voyeuristic gaze of the camera is also masculine, most protagonists are male, and films are centered on masculine themes. In this way, the male gaze encourages spectators to identify with the male protagonist rather than the more marginal female characters (837). Lorraine Gamman argues that through the use of female protagonists and women-centered themes, film narratives may appropriate patriarchal constructions and produce a “female gaze” that “articulates *mockery of machismo*” (15).

On one level, *Thelma and Louise* does precisely what Gamman suggests; throughout the film, Thelma and Louise direct their gaze onto the men around them. Louise shows Thelma how to see through men’s façades, in order to see them for who they truly are: she teaches Thelma to recognize when men are hitting on her (when she meets Harlan), to understand that telling the police “the truth” will never work, and to realize that truckers do not always live up to their trustworthy reputations. Thelma certainly learns from Louise, but she also has her own experiences with the female gaze, which she directs at J.D.’s character as a sexual object. By the end of the film, though, Thelma and Louise do more than merely appropriate the male gaze. In the final scene, Thelma grabs Louise’s hand and looks beyond the men and forward into the Grand Canyon. Over the course of this paper, I will examine the way in which Thelma and Louise use the female gaze to look *through*, look *at*, and look *beyond* the men in the movie.

Mulvey argues that in films that involve the “male gaze,” viewers cannot identify with a female character to the same extent that they identify

with a male character, because the man is the “representative of power” and the one who makes “things happen” (838). In *Thelma and Louise*, however, the female characters are more accessible to the viewer than their male counterparts. Throughout the movie, the male characters are either left behind, objectified, defied, ridiculed, or even murdered, “presenting a significant challenge to the male gaze” (Gamman 16). Thelma’s husband Daryl is a prime example of this issue with male identification: we have no sympathy for him, and his self-importance engenders our spite and ridicule. At the beginning of the movie, when Thelma asks Daryl if he wants “anything special” for dinner, we might think that Daryl defies Thelma by saying that he “may not even make it home for dinner,” so he “doesn’t give a shit” (Khouri 7); however, Thelma is the one defying him because she knows that she will not be home for dinner after she leaves with Louise. When he says “you know how Fridays are,” Thelma is not naïve enough to believe this story. She responds by saying sarcastically “funny how so many people want to buy a carpet on a Friday night,” and it is clear to the audience, although maybe not to Daryl, that she is mocking him (7). With Louise’s guidance, Thelma is ultimately able to make it clear to Daryl she will no longer tolerate his behavior. When she calls him from Oklahoma, she tells him to “go fuck [himself]” (59). Later in the film, Thelma sees through Daryl completely, even going so far as to manipulate him for her own purposes. She calls him on the phone from another rest stop, hoping to discern whether or not the cops have already questioned him. Daryl greets Thelma with uncharacteristic sweetness—one of the FBI officers had instructed him to answer the phone “like you’re happy to hear from her. Like you really miss her. Women

love that shit” (103). But Thelma is not so easily tricked; she hangs up the phone immediately and tells Louise: “He knows” (125).

At the start of the film Thelma has trouble seeing through the men around her, but Louise seems to possess this skill in spades. When Thelma and Louise stop at a night club, a man named Harlan approaches their table. He asks: “Now what’re a couple of Kewpie dolls like you doin’ in a place like this?” (Khourie 18). Thelma immediately explains their whole situation, while Louise tells him to mind his own business. When Harlan leaves the table, Thelma criticizes Louise for being too dismissive of Harlan, and “jaded” because of all of her “years of waitressing” (20). Louise patronizes Thelma for not being able to “tell when somebody’s hitting on [her]” (20). Louise’s suspicions about Harlan, however, are later substantiated when he attempts to rape Thelma. Louise threatens him with a gun, and he steps away from Thelma; but even with his fly down, exposed in the most literal of senses, Harlan still does not back down. Instead, he looks down the barrel of the pistol and tells Louise to “suck [his] cock” (29); Louise shoots him dead.

The degree of certainty with which Louise decides to kill reveals that she is in an entirely different place from Thelma: she automatically sees danger in the presence of a man, even when his intentions seem honorable. This becomes further evident when Thelma proposes that they just call the police and “tell ‘em what happened” (Khourie 31). Louise has seen situations like theirs before and insists that this will do no good because “one hundred people” saw them “dancing cheek to goddamn cheek” (32). She asserts that they “don’t live in that kind of world,” where the police believe

women's perspective on rape (32). Lynda Hart contends that "Thelma naively believes that simply telling the 'truth' will exonerate them. Louise has to teach her that the symbolic order is a masculine imaginary" (435). Louise recognizes that she and Thelma can no longer exist in the "symbolic order"; they cannot reintegrate into society. No good will come out of going to the police for Thelma and Louise—just like all of the men in their world, the police will only doubt them. Even when it becomes clear that Hal (the police chief) wants to believe them, his good intentions do not exclude him from the "masculine imaginary" Hart describes.

The final stage of Thelma's evolution toward Louise's well-developed ability to see through the men on the road takes place in their encounter with the truck driver. Thelma's initial impression of the truck driver is that he is letting them pass him because truckers are the "best drivers on the road" (Khourie 111). But when he flicks his tongue at them, Thelma reacts with disgust. Later, when they encounter him again, he asks them if they "are ready for a big dick" and Thelma and Louise decide to teach him a lesson (Scott 01:49). They pull over, he follows them, and Thelma leads the confrontation. She says "I mean really! That business with your tongue. What is that? That was disgusting" (Khourie 169). Louise asks him how he would feel if someone did that to his wife or his mama. They ask him to apologize, and when he responds by yelling "Fuck you!" they shoot out his tires and then blow up his truck (170). By the time they are pulled over by the macho state trooper, Thelma takes the lead in teaching an overbearing man his lesson. She puts a gun to his head, politely telling him to hand over his gun and get into his trunk. Thelma urges him to be "sweet" to the

women in his life because “my husband wasn’t sweet to me and look how I turned out” (149). Whereas the lesson Thelma and Louise taught the truck driver was disciplinary, aimed at a misdeed already committed, the lesson they teach the policeman is pre-emptive, less comic, and more brutal. When they force the policeman to get in the trunk, there is no more going back for Thelma and Louise.

The linear trajectory of Thelma’s progress toward a simple kind of mimicry of bad male behavior is complicated by the appearance, directly in the middle of film, of the hitchhiking cowboy J.D. Right after Thelma tells Daryl to “go fuck [himself],” she trips over J.D., and almost immediately, he becomes an alternative to her pathetic, tyrannical husband (Khourie 59). Thelma does not look *through* him in the way she is learning to do with other men; instead, Thelma looks *at* J.D., and she does so with desire: whereas Thelma tells Louise that “you could park a car in the shadow of [Daryl’s] ass,” J.D. has a “cute butt” (63). Thelma voices her desire for J.D.’s body in a sexually empowered way. She goes on to invite J.D. to her motel room late at night, and after a few games and a long, almost flirtatious discussion about J.D.’s armed robberies, they have sex. Margaret Carlson argues that the brief amount of time between Thelma’s attempted rape and her sexual awakening sends a problematic message about assault. She writes that this development suggests that:

the only thing an unhappy woman needs is good sex to make everything all right... It requires a breathtaking midair somersault of faith to believe Thelma would be eager to take up with another stranger so soon and

would let him into her motel room and go limp with desire after he admits he robs convenience stores for a living (57).

But perhaps Carlson's point encourages the conception of woman as a passive victim. Patricia Mellencamp makes the alternative observation that this is a liberating experience for Thelma because "sex is no longer a fantasy keeping Thelma captive or a secret key to identity" (149). As Glenn Mann argues, the episode provides empowering narratives for Thelma: "Not only does Thelma gain sexual liberation in her relationship with J.D.; she also gains the opportunity to play out his life story, to adopt a dominant male role when she performs her gun waving act which J.D. taught her" (41). In fact, one could argue that not only does J.D. liberate Thelma sexually, but he also empowers her economically when he describes how he goes about armed robbery—a technique that Thelma goes on to imitate later in the film. And when J.D. steals all of Louise's money, he inadvertently pushes them into complete financial freedom: it is not until Thelma uses the information that J.D. left her about robbing convenience stores that the women can be truly independent. Brenda Cooper argues that the "sexual encounter can be read alternatively, as the female gaze appropriating the male gaze" (295); as a result of her newfound ability to see through men, Thelma takes charge of her sexuality and her own narrative altogether. Louise, however, does not immediately realize the liberating effect that Thelma experiences with J.D.; he retains her deep mistrust of men, regardless of their apparent intentions.

The only point in the film where we question Louise's steadfast



resistance to male authority takes place when she is on the phone with the police detective, Hal. It becomes clear that Hal only wants the two women to make it out okay. He seems to be on their side, and when J.D. steals all of Louise's money, he blames J.D. for putting them in the position of needing to commit armed robbery: "Do you think Thelma Dickinson would have committed armed robbery if you hadn't taken all their money?" (Khourie 121). When J.D. denies his accusations, Hal hits him several times over the head and says:

There're two girls out there that had a chance, they had a chance!... And you blew it for 'em. Now they've gotten in some serious trouble, and for at least part of it, I'm gonna hold you personally responsible for anything that happens to them... and you're gonna tell me every damn thing you know so that there's a small chance I can actually do them some good. (122)

Hal is not the unsympathetic police officer that Louise anticipates; he wants to save them. Louise talks to him on the phone and he says that he "needs [her] help" to make everybody else believe that it was an "accident" (158). But she refuses to let him take them into custody, and she tells him that when she thinks about "incarceration, cavity search, death by electrocution, life in prison" she doesn't know "if [she] wants to come out alive" (159). And then he tells her that he knows about "what happened to [her] in Texas," Louise's previous trauma, the exact nature of which is kept from the audience (Scott 01:45). Hart argues that Louise consciously decides at this moment not to "try to overcome her resistances and allow the sympa-

thetic detective, who in fact does know her history, to ‘save’ her” (Khourie 453). But this is not clear in the movie; when we learn that Hal knows what happened, Louise’s eyes well up and she goes silent. Just as we wonder if Louise will give up running, and perhaps submit back into the patriarchal order, Thelma urges her not to bail out now. Now it is clear that Thelma has completely “crossed over,” as she later articulates. When Louise loses her resolve, it is clear that Thelma can see through the police in a way that she could not before.

Hal sets up J.D. as the villain from whom he must protect the two implicitly helpless women. But in fact, J.D.’s openly self-serving theft of the women’s money does more to set the women up for self-liberation than anything the police chief or Louise’s supportive boyfriend, Jimmy, could do. The relationship between J.D. and Thelma subjugates neither the female character to male narrative control, nor subjugates the man to female narrative control. J.D. functions as a narrative device that helps catalyze Thelma’s and Louise’s ultimate escape from the male gaze; specifically, he facilitates Thelma in her transition from looking *at* men to looking *beyond* them. This is especially visible in the use of camera angles throughout the film. For example, when J.D. first enters the film, the camera faces Thelma head on, and we see J.D. behind the car. As she applies her makeup in the rearview mirror, Thelma keeps her head facing forward while she looks at him through her side window. We see the seeds of Thelma’s desire for J.D. grow as her glances to the mirror lengthen in duration. The camera does not show us the view from the mirror until J.D. begins to approach the car—for that brief moment, Thelma’s view of J.D. is entirely hers. Although Thelma

is looking back at the man behind the car, she nonetheless keeps her head facing forward (Scott 02:05).

This continuous look forward continues through the final scene, when the police line up behind the Thunderbird and neither woman looks back at all. Instead, the camera angle shows the women looking at each other and looking beyond, away from the audience, into the Grand Canyon. They look at each other and Thelma says: "Okay, then listen. Let's not get caught" (Khourie 185). As Thelma tells Louise "Let's keep goin'," her gaze is directed at Louise (Scott 02:04). And when Louise asks Thelma "What are ya talkin' about?" (Khourie 185). Thelma glances over the precipice while Louise directs her eyes to Thelma, asking "You sure?" (Scott 02:04). They exchange a long look, then Louise kisses Thelma, looks over into the Grand Canyon herself, and the camera zooms out as Louise steps on the gas. At the end of the film, Thelma and Louise are not focused on the men in their wake at all; their focus is only directed on each other and on what lies beyond.

The evolution of the ways Thelma looks through, at, and beyond men is more sharply defined within the scope of the movie than Louise's. In the beginning of the movie, Thelma learns to see through men with Louise's guidance: she exposes Daryl, Harlan, and the truck-driver for who they truly are. Thelma also learns how to look at men in a new way, as we see in the way she gazes at and talks about J.D. At the end of the movie, Thelma is the one who proposes the idea to Louise that they forget about the "army" of men lined up behind them altogether and look beyond (Khourie 180). This evolution is more difficult to track in Louise's character, though. The

exact nature of Louise's earlier trauma that shapes her attitudes towards men is not revealed to the audience. Her relationship to Jimmy is ambiguous, too: is she capable of trusting him, unlike other men? The audience does not have access to Jimmy's character in the same way we have access to other men in the film. He is not comic like Daryl, or sweet like J.D. He shows violent tendencies, as when he knocks over the table in Louise's motel room, but he also seems to care deeply about Louise. We also know that Louise has the ability to look beyond the men in her life: we see this in her decision to leave Jimmy in the first place, and in her moments of erotic valence with Thelma. Perhaps at the end of the film she has abandoned heterosexual relatedness altogether. In the film's conclusion, the modes of looking leave the male gaze behind completely; in its void, both the subject and the object of the gaze are female. The final shot does not include Thelma and Louise plummeting to their destruction; on the contrary, it shows them liberated and frozen in the sky above the Grand Canyon. *Thelma and Louise* demonstrates both cinematographically and narratively how life within the male-dominated order and the abyss is a choice, and they choose the abyss.

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